

THE LAST INTERVIEW WITH MIHO BACCICH (1933)

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NOTES FROM THE TRANSLATOR

In December 1933, a journalist from Zagreb, Luka Pejovic, interviewed Miho Baccich in his New Orleans home for a book on emigrant Dalmatian seafarers. At that time Baccich was nearly 75 years of age and living with his three unmarried daughters in 1516 Soniat Street, New Orleans. The interview was subsequently published as an article "With M.A. Baccich" in the 1935 book *Yugoslavs in the South, Volume II, Louisiana-Texas-Mississippi*. [1] On 12 December of the same year (1935) Miho Baccich passed away at his home, aged 76 years and 9 months.

The grammatical first person narrative in the Baccich interview makes it very special. In it we can discern the grandfather that Gustave Rathe knew as a young boy – the grandfather he described in his book *The Wreck of the Barque Stefano Off the North West Coast of Australia in 1875* and the grandfather he talked about in the documentary triptych *The Resurrection of the Barque Stefano*. [2]

The Baccich interview is important for another reason. In it we are told in unambiguous terms how and why the *Stefano* came to be shipwrecked:

When we were about 10 miles from the coast of Western Australia, the captain ordered the helmsman to turn in the north-west direction but the helmsman mistakenly turned the vessel in the north-east direction, the ship sailed towards the shore, hit an underwater rock and broke up. [3]

The explanation for the shipwreck in the original manuscript is not as clear-cut as it is presented in two parts. The first part states that the ship's course was changed in the north by west direction when it came near the West Australian coast:

For their own security and in order to avoid the coral reefs and numberless submerged rocks, which treacherously guard this savage and fierce looking coast, it was deemed advisable once more to change route and turn the ship's prow in a north by west direction. [4]

The second part of the explanation indicates that there was some kind of misunderstanding when the ship's route was changed but it does not name the helmsman as being responsible for the mistake – probably in an attempt to protect the helmsman and the officer responsible:

The ship was wrecked on a submerged rock at about 22°48' meridian latitude and 113°37'40" longitude by a current which drew it in shoreward, caused by a misunderstanding of signals when the ship's route had been changed (A). [5]

The above description has created a degree of ambiguity among some readers of the manuscript. One unauthorized and best-unnamed translation distorts and inverts the manuscript meaning altogether - to paraphrase:

The ship was wrecked on a submerged rock at about 22°48' meridian latitude and 113°37'40" longitude by a current which drew it in shoreward, rather than by an error in setting the new direction (A).

The 1933 interview with Baccich removes all ambiguities as to what happened. The fact that the captain of the *Stefano* ordered the helmsman to turn in the north-west direction is uncontested. The fact that the *Stefano* was sailing in the north-east direction after the captain ordered it to turn in north-west direction, is also uncontested. This was documented by many sources immediately upon the arrival of the two survivors at Fremantle on 5 May 1876. These include (bold font - my emphasis):

- Fremantle Harbour Master, Geo. A Forsyth, in a letter by to the Governor of WA, on 5 May 1876:

The Chronometers appear to have been very much out, and on the 27th October 1875, while steering **N. by E.** at 2. a m. the ship struck upon a reef approximate position Lat. 23° S. & Long. 113° 43E. about 25 miles to the Southward and Eastward of Point Cloates.

State Records Office of Western Australia (SROWA). CSR 844 fol. 71

- Evidence given by Michael Baccich (J. Vincent translator) at the Preliminary Court of Inquiry into the wreck of the *Stefano*, at the Custom House, Fremantle, 8 May 1876:

... the Vessel was sailing with all sail set going at the rate of nine knots, and ran on the reef without warning steering by Compass **N by E.** directly she struck the sea swept the decks and the crew took to the masts to wait for daylight. (SROWA). CSR 844 fol. 78

- *The Western Australian Times*, "Fremantle-Port Topics. The Wreck of the Barque *Stephano*", 9 May 1876, p. 2:

The vessel was steering by her compass **North by East** and at the time she struck was going at the rate of 12 knots an hour; some of her studding sails were set, she lasted about two hours on the reef and then, turned bottom upwards and broke up; some of the wreck floated ashore.

- *The Inquirer & Commercial News*, "Shipwreck and Loss of Life. Distressing Particulars.", 10 May 1876, page 3:

The vessel at the time was steering **North by East**.

- *The Herald Fremantle*, WA, "The Loss of the *Stefano*" 20 May 1876, p. 3

on the 27th about 2 a.m., the vessel steering a **North by East** course, and with all sail set suddenly struck with tremendous force upon a sunken reef.

The same information is repeated again in:

- *The Western Australian Catholic Record*, “The Loss of *Stefano* and *Gem*”, 6 June 1876, p. 6.

... on the 27th, about 2 am, the vessel steering a **North by East** course and with all sail set, suddenly struck with tremendous force upon a sunken reef. (CSR 844/ 105)

The Baccich interview makes it clear why the vessels, ordered by the captain to sail in the north-west direction, ended up sailing in the north-east direction before becoming shipwrecked off Point Cloates.

Notes and References

1. See Pejovic, L.M., *Jugosloveni na Jugu. Sveska II. Louisiana-Texas-Mississippi*, Dameron-Pierson Co., Ltd. New Orleans, LA., U.S.A., Pages 47-49. The time and the location of the interview were provided in 1999 to the translator by Gustave Rathe – the grandson of Miho Baccich. The rare original Croatian text “Kod M.A. Baccich” was graciously provided to the translator by Neven Smoje in 2017, also courtesy of Gustave Rathe. It was translated from Croatian by Dr Josko Petkovic in August 2017, with only a few minor stylistic changes.
2. Rathe, G., *The Wreck of the Barque Stefano Off the North West Cape of Australia in 1875*, (Carlisle, WA, Hesperian Press, 1990) and Petkovic, J., *The Resurrection of the Barque Stefano* (3 screen triptych, 60 min, digital recording), 2000.
3. Pejovic, L.M., *Op Cit.* The details of the interview were repeated by the following 1937, 1940, 1974 and 1990 publications:
 - *Jadranska Straža*, “Bilješke: Otmjena Ulica u New Orleansu (U.S.A.) Nosi Ime Našeg Pomorskog Kapetana”, Year XV, no 12, 1937, page 524. Split
 - Ž.V., “Jedna otmjena ulica u New Orleansu nosi ime dubrovačkog pom. kapetana Bačića”, *Dubrava*, VIII/1940, no. 82, p. 9.
 - Vujnovic, Milos M., *Yugoslavs in Louisiana*, Gretna, 1974, pp. 96-98.
 - Rathe, G., *Op-Cit.*, p.25
4. Baccich, M. and Skurla, S., *The Wreck of the Austro-Hungarian Barque Stefano Off the North West Coast of Australian in 1875*, translated Angelina Baccich, IM: Interactive Media e-journal, Issue 3, May 2007, p. 15. Accessed August 2017, <http://imjournal.murdoch.edu.au/im-issue-3-2007/>
5. Baccich-Skural, *Op-Cit.*, p. 39.

