

Cultural Achievements of the Slovene Diaspora in Australia

I

The first Slovene experiences of Australia, if one of the first documented visits of a Slovene to Australia is taken into consideration, go back into the colonial period. A certain Matija Klinier arrived to Australia sometime between 1857 and 1859, when he was working on the Austrian (Habsburg) military ship on its journey around the world. Rihard Pogačnik came to Australia in 1860, working as a navigation officer on one of the steamers owned by Lloyd's from Trieste (Trst). Anton Dolenc was during 1890 and 1891 on an Austrian military ship likewise making its way around the world and also stopped in Australia. He kept a diary about his journey on which he reported in the then Slovene papers. It is interesting, though, that none of these early Slovene visitors of Australia decided to stay for good, although the gold rush still swept the land and attracted many settlers from other European countries.

According to some authors (Ogrin), the first Slovenes that actually migrated to Australia to settle there came in 1910. The exact number of Slovenes that migrated before the Great War is difficult to ascertain, for they were citizens of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy who declared themselves as Austrians. It is known that in Australia during the war broke out racial unrest against the migrants from South East Europe, i.e. including those from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy with Slovenes, who were, according to some data, under closer surveillance because of possible German affiliations and sympathies (Birska). The first major

wave of migration was caused by the legally limited immigration to the U.S.A. at the beginning of the 1920s, when almost ten thousand Slovenes settled in Australia. Many of them came from the Littoral region (Primorska), areas that after the Great War came under Italian rule. By migrating they wanted not only to improve their economic condition but also to avoid the violent policy of the Italianization of the Slovene population in the area.

The main reasons for Slovene migration to Australia after the Second World War were the changes in the socio-political system in Slovenia within the former socialist Yugoslavia and the difficult economic situation in the country, resulting first from the waste of the war and later on from the quick industrialization and deagrarization process. It is difficult to establish an exact current number of Slovene migrants living in Australia; the most reliable sources mention the number 25,000 (Klemenčič, Račič), although this number could, together with the second generation already born in Australia, perhaps attain 30,000 (Birska). Immediately after the Second World War the first migrants from Slovenia were refugees, who, for political reasons from the refugee camps in Italy and Austria, came to Australia in the late forties. At first they were confined to live in working camps and thus pay for the one-month long ship journey "down under", e.g. in camps like Bathurst, Greta, Liverpool or Villawood in New South Wales or Bonegilla in Victoria.

In the fifties, when because of the sealed border illegal crossings represented the most frequent way of departure from Slovenia abroad, Slovenes started to leave for Australia also for largely economic reasons, which have remained the main ones ever since. Before arriving to Australia, they had spent some time in Italy or in other European countries. In the sixties when the border of the former Yugoslavia was opened, many Slovenes from the Littoral (Primorska) and the Prekmurje region migrated to Australia legally, i.e. within the established migration quotas for

Yugoslavia. In the seventies, especially after 1978, migration decreased and one can no longer speak of the waves of immigration but of individuals and groups of migration. Return migrants or “repatriates” back to the former Yugoslavia, of which Slovenia was one of the six republics, were likewise few. At present the greatest concentrations of Slovenes are located in major Australian cities and industrial centres, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Canberra, Perth, Wollongong, Geelong, and smaller concentrations can be found also in Brisbane, Darwin and Hobart.

Soon after their arrival to the new land, Slovene migrants began to establish the first migrant societies, associations or clubs in these places: in 1953 the Slovene Society “Danica” in Wollongong was established, in 1955 the Slovene Society Melbourne, in 1957 the Slovene Society Sydney (in Melbourne and Sydney there are currently several of them). Altogether there are at present twenty-five clubs and organizations of Slovene migrants, with twelve societies having their own “homes” (Košorok 177). As everywhere else among Slovene migrants abroad, the role of the Catholic Church is important in organizing social and cultural life. Slovene churches and cultural centres and schools have thus been established: the Slomšek School in Sydney and Melbourne, the “Home of Mother Romana for the Aged” in Melbourne, and the library in the Baraga House in Melbourne, which was opened “officially” only in 1977 in order to help the migrants preserve the knowledge of the Slovene language and culture.

Although there were some brief radio emissions in the Slovene language broadcast already in the sixties and early seventies, the Australian government, within the framework of the policy of multiculturalism, only in 1978 officially established the ethnic radio (SBS), which has since then continued to broadcast also in Slovene. In 1976 the Slovenes demanded from the ethnic radio board to be given an independent radio hour, which was consequently given to them in all the major Australian cities. The

ethnic radio does not only inform the migrants about issues they are immediately concerned with in Australia, but also enables to keep them informed about current developments in Slovenia.

Together with the establishment of Slovene societies there emerged also Slovene migrant papers. The very first one called *Misli* was published at the beginning of the fifties, then came *Slovenska kronika*, *Vestnik*, *Žar*, *Slovenski obzornik* that were published for a longer or shorter span of time, and since then there have been at least twenty Slovene migrant papers published in Australia. According to the *Directory of Slovenian Activities in Australia* there are at present twelve papers active: *Misli*, *Rafael*, *Vestnik*, *Glas Slovenije*, *Svobodni razgovori*, *The Australian Slovenian Review* (in English), *Novice*, *Oznanila*, *Glas planinke*, *Tedenske novice*, *Klubske novice Perth*, *Društvene Novice*. As far as the teaching of the Slovene language is concerned, Slovene is not merely taught as an additional language refresher course organized within individual Slovene societies and religious centres. In Melbourne and Sydney secondary-school students can take Slovene as a subject for the final examination, while the lectorate for the Slovene language was opened in 1989 at Macquarie University in Sydney, initially with the financial assistance of Slovene migrants themselves and then also with the help of the Slovene government and the University of Ljubljana.

II

The literary creativity of Slovene migrants in Australia began soon after the first wave of settlement in the mid-fifties, when literary production coincided with the emergence of the first papers and journals where the first sketches and poems were published. In 1962 the first Slovene book was published in Australia (Melbourne), the book of poems *Bronasti tolkač* (The Bronze

Knocker) by Bert Pribac. In 1973 appeared his second book of poems *V kljunu golobice* (In the Beak of a Dove). In 1979 when first appeared the paper *Avstralski Slovenec*, literary production started to become more artistically accomplished. Dramatic activity has likewise been very lively, for example the theatre groups Triglav and Merrylands, and even the shooting of a film with migrant themes, "Vrnitev domov" ("Coming Back Home") took place, but was never finished.

Slovene writers from among the Slovene diaspora in Australia very early saw the need to have their own literary journal, one that would make their literary contributions more properly presented, contextualized and not "lost" among other material published in daily papers. The poet Bert Pribac in 1967 (together with Lev Detela who lived in Vienna) published the literary journal *Slovenska vest*, which was in existence only one year. The paper *Avstralski Slovenec*, which only recently unfortunately ceased publication, in the late seventies encouraged literary creativity among the migrants. In the seventies was published also the weekly for Yugoslav migrants *Nova doba*. There was a Slovene page in it edited by the poet Pavla Gruden. There were several linguistic and historical teaching books and readers published, e.g. *Prvi koraki* by Jože Čuješ, *Slovenian Literary Reader - Slovensko slovstvo - berilo* by Aleksandra L. Ceferin and *The Slovenians from the Earliest Times* by Draga Gelt.

In 1982 the poet and cultural worker Pavla Gruden from Sydney started to publish the literary journal *Svobodni razgovori*, the editor has then been for some time the poet Jože Žohar and since 1996 the journal has still been edited by Pavla Gruden. The journal is published by SALUK (The Slovene-Australian Literary Circle), based in Sydney, and contains the current artistic literary creativity by Slovene migrants in Australia. The journal has the following objectives: to preserve and encourage to learn the Slovene language, to contribute to the cultural creativity of the

Australian multicultural literary society, to make the journal a starting-point for the young Slovene writers creating in English, and finally to broaden the Slovene cultural space by exchanging information about culture with Slovenia. The editor Pavla Gruden is also a poet in her own right and the importance of her cultural activity among the migrants in Australia has been very significant. In 1977 she wrote a poem in English "Sing-A-Long to Wollongong", put to music by Martin Konda. It was to become the migrant anthem of Wollongong known for its diverse ethnic structure; however, the plan never materialized.

In 1986 a multilingual anthology of poetry, fiction and drama *Naše steze (Our Paths)* was published in Melbourne by the Association of Yugoslav Writers in Australia and New Zealand). The editor of the Slovene section of the book was Ivanka Škof. Literary contributions of Slovene migrant writers were published in it and elsewhere in migrant press bilingually (poetry and fiction written by Danijela Hliš, Danica N. Petrič, Ivanka Škof, Vasja Čuk, Peter Košak, and Bert Pribac). With the emergence of *Svobodni razgovori* other migrant papers and journals did not entirely lose its literary mission. In view of the fact that the inflow of Slovene migrants into Australia in the nineties almost entirely stopped, the new press has had to focus on the younger second or third generation of Slovene descent, the generation that can no longer speak Slovene but is nevertheless very much interested in the discovery of its "roots". A successful attempt of this kind is the first Slovene migrant paper in Australia published entirely in English, *The Australian Slovenian Review*, since 1994 edited by a group of young intellectuals of Slovene descent. It does not have an explicitly literary note, but we do find in it travelogues about journeys in Slovenia, reminiscences and memoirs with at least some literary value, and other more popular writings that might be of interest to the younger English speaking generations of Australians with Slovene roots.

As mentioned earlier the Catholic Church plays an important role in the preservation of the Slovene ethnic identity also with younger generations (e.g. The Slovenian Cultural and Religious Centre, Slovenian Theatre Group, Slovenian Youth Production, etc). In this process are important contacts with Slovenia, the Summer School of the Slovene Language every year organized in Slovenia and frequented by many young Australians, various publishing outlets in Slovenia such as, for example, *Rodna gruda* and *Slovenija* and occasional anthologies of Slovene migrant writing produced in Australia, which are published by the Slovene Emigrant Centre (1985, 1988, 1991). The founding of The Slovenian Studies Foundation Trust, which has with the financial assistance of Slovene migrants themselves helped to preserve the Slovene lectorate at Macquarie University in Sydney, is of great importance for the preservation of the Slovene language and Slovene culture in Australia. The teaching of Slovene on secondary school level has since 1976 been expanding and became part of the general system of education, chiefly owing to Aleksandra L. Ceferin and Draga Gelt. The latter was awarded the Order of Australia for her work in trying to keep the Slovene language and ethnic identity alive in Australia. However, despite the efforts, the assimilation and integration of the second generation of migrants cannot be avoided, for they can speak only English and hardly understand any Slovene (Suša 1996).

Most migrants of the first generation are emotionally still very much linked with the "old country", although they at the same time actively participate in creating a tolerant and viable multicultural society in Australia. It is poetry, being historically one of the major early literary genres in Slovene literature, that has with its very personal lyrical note represented also the major genre in the literary production of Slovene migrants in Australia. It has increasingly come to possess more general artistic merits (Bert Pribac, Jože Žohar, Pavla Gruden, Danijela Hliš), growing beyond

the early pathetic nostalgia, patriotic sentimentality and the usage of stock images. The Slovene migrant literary creativity thus represents a living link between Slovene (European) and Australian literature and culture.

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