

*This speech was prepared and presented by Marjan Ulčar at the Slovenian Summer Camp in Bolton, Ontario for the 57th Slovenski Dan on July 3, 2016.*

### **Topic: Slovenians and Canadians in the past 25 years of Independence**

Before I begin with my presentation, Slovenians and Canadians in the past 25 years of Independence, let me recap some Slovenian history. Slovenia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until it dissolved after WWI. As a result of the Versailles Treaty, some parts of Slovenia were divided amongst Austria and Italy and the rest was forced to be part of the kingdom of Yugoslavia. After WWII, the communists took control of Yugoslavia with Josip Tito as its president. Tito did not agree with Stalin and refused to accept Moscow as the supreme communist authority. Even though Yugoslavia was under communistic rule, they were not controlled by the USSR.

Slovenia only made up 8% of the population of Yugoslavia, but it contributed 25% of Yugoslavia's Gross National Product even though Serbians outnumbered Slovenians 4 to 1.

After Tito died in 1980, the underlying ethnic, religious and economic tensions within Yugoslavia were quick to surface.

Originally, the president of Slovenia, Milan Kučan, attempted to negotiate the existence of each Yugoslavian province maintaining its own identity and national rights. They were not able to reach a satisfactory understanding because Serbia wanted Yugoslavian domination.

So now let us acknowledge the contributions that Canada made to help Slovenia reach independence and ultimately prosper.

Canadians were quick to form the Canadian Slovenian Congress with Dr. France Habjan as the

first president. They started working on many projects including helping Slovenia to prepare for a World Slovenian Congress by sending \$18,000 to help with expenses.

In 1990, 24 Slovenian organizations came together and formed the Flood Victims Relief Fund to help flood victims in Slovenia. Over \$34,000 was collected. The following year the organizing committee of the Relief Fund agreed to change the name to Vse Slovenski Odbor. Now the objectives of this committee was to help Slovenian people morally, politically, and financially to attain their independence and for the recognition of a Democratic Republic of Slovenia. Stane Kranjc was the first president.

On December 23, 1990, 89% of Slovenians in Slovenia voted in a Referendum for an independent Slovenia. As a result, June 25, 1991 was declared as the date to proclaim their Independence. The Canadian Slovenian Congress was asked to elect 12 delegates in establishing the World Slovenian Congress. The purpose of the Slovenian World Congress was to help Slovenia achieve democratic independence and recognition on the world stage.

Therefore, on June 25, the Yugoslavian flag was replaced with the new Slovenian flag. As celebrations continued into the night, Yugoslavian tanks were driving toward Slovenia. Soon most of the roads to Ljubljana were blocked by the Yugoslav tanks and soldiers.

During this time, in Canada, under the framework of Vse Slovenski Odbor, the Slovenian Information Center was established with Leander Škof and Dorothy Lenarčič facilitating communications with the Canadian media. Since Slovenia was so small, the fear was that the powerful Yugoslav Army would overrun Slovenia while the international community would be apathetic to the situation. For this reason, media presence was vital to keep the world informed as to what was going on.

However, since Slovenia was expecting military aggression from the Yugoslavian army, they had already prepared to defend themselves. Their foresight paid off. The Slovenian forces outmanoeuvred the Yugoslav army and the war was over in 10 days. During this time Canadian Slovenians organized many demonstrations in Toronto and all across Canada. There were many protests against the attacks on Slovenia, demanding an end to the aggression and the need to recognize Slovenia as its own republic.

The Brioni Agreement of August 6 brought an end to the violence and in the weeks that followed the Yugoslav Army began pulling out of Slovenia. As a result of the war, unfortunately Slovenia suffered 18 casualties with another 182 injured.

The original Flood Relief Fund now became the war relief fund and Canada was able to send Slovenia \$500,000 as well as much needed medical equipment. All of this money was used directly for recovery efforts.

In Slovenia, Canadian delegates actively assisted Slovenian dignitaries by translating their letters and speeches from Slovenian to English to ensure the proper message was getting out to the world.

In Canada, many discussions took place with the Canadian government officials stressing the need for Slovenian independence and recognition. At that time The Progressive Conservative Party was in power with Brian Mulroney as Prime Minister. However, since Mulroney worked closely with President Bush of the Republican Party, there was concern that Canada would be influenced by the USA's rejection of the independence of Slovenia.

In spite of this fear, a celebration was being organized for January 15, 1992. Vse Slovenski Odbor (VSO) wrote many letters to politicians in Ottawa as well as invitations to foreign minister Barbara McDugall and PM Brian Mulroney to join the celebration. The lack of response from the Prime Minister's office regarding the recognition of Slovenian independence concerned the organizers. However, Patrick Boyer representing PC did attend the event at Brezmadežna at which there were over 1000 people congregated at the church hall. Speakers were set up in the foyer and parking lots so that everyone could be part of this momentous

occasion. Finally that evening the much anticipated telegram was received from Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. It read:

For IMMEDIATE RELEASE:  
CANADA RECOGNIZES THE INDEPENDENCE  
OF THE REPUBLICS  
OF SLOVENIA AND CROATIA.

Finally, Slovenia received her well deserved status in the world as the Republic of Slovenia. Now the work would begin to encourage trade and establish more business connections between Canada and Slovenia. Since the Canadian Slovenian Chamber of Commerce was formed in 1990, the first Canadian Slovenian Trade mission was already able to take place in 1994. Accompanying the 16 Slovenian Canadian business delegates was the Mayor of Mississauga Hon. Hazel McAllion. Meetings were held in various cities throughout Slovenia establishing communications between businesses in both countries.

Meanwhile in Canada, there was only 8,500 Slovenians registered in the Canadian Census of 1991. Since there was definitely more people of Slovenian descent, the push was on to encourage people to declare their Slovenian roots. To this end, Stane Kranjc, Jožica Vegelj and Dr. Habjan wrote and mailed hundreds of letters across Canada asking and informing people to register as Slovenians. Consequently, in the 1996 census, there was 25,700 people registered as Slovenians. Five years later, the number increased to 36,000 registered Slovenians. It is estimated that there are approximately fifty thousand Slovenians that currently live in Canada.

Also 1991, the weekly radio program 'Voice of Canadian Slovenians' was established under the umbrella of VSO. Marija Ahacic Pollack took the lead. Since its debut, there has been over 1300 programs aired operating solely with volunteers.

In 1992, Hamilton opened their senior citizens home 'Villa Slovenia' with 30 apartments. It was built by the Slovenian St. Joseph's Society. Dom Lipa had already opened in 1988. After the expansion in 2001, it can now accommodate 30 retirement and 66 long term care residents.

The Embassy of the Republic of Slovenia opened in Ottawa in 1993. The first Ambassador was Marjan Majcen. Canadian Slovenians were encouraged to applying for Slovenian Citizenship. Voting rights and the ability to obtain a Slovenian passport were some of the privileges of becoming a Slovenian citizen.

In 1996, the periodical Glasilo was established and published by VSO. The goal of this magazine was to further unite and inform the Slovenian communities across Canada through lots of articles and pictures of events.

By 1997, Slovenia started compensating Slovenian refugees of world war two for time spent in the war camps. After completing an application and providing proper documentation, the applicant was financially awarded. The amount was proportional to the length of time spent in the camps.

In 1999, the Slovenian government appointed Jože Slobodnik to take on the roll of Honorary Consul of the Republic of Slovenia to assist the Canadian Slovenian community with pertinent dealings involving Slovenia. This office is now held by John Doma.

In 2002, the Canadian Slovenian Historical Society was established. Its objectives were to research, compile, organize and preserve historical information and documents of Slovenians in Canada. Its first president was Stane Kranjc.

At this time as well, at Pier 21 National Historic Site in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a commemorative plaque was unveiled and a Slovenian flag was placed in the museum to honour Slovenians in Canada who arrived through pier 21..

In 2004, Slovenia became members of the European Union and four years later, Slovenia took its turn to successfully chair the European Union.

In order to give a voice to Slovenians living outside of the republic, the Slovenian government established the Government Council for Slovenians abroad. VSO and the Slovenian Embassy in Ottawa organized the first Convention of all Slovenians in Canada. Invited to the Convention were the representatives of Slovenian organizations and institutions in Canada. At the convention in

November 2006, Stane Kranjc was elected as the Canadian Representative for the Council for Slovenians abroad.

As you can see, over the past 25 years there has been a lot of hard work and successful initiatives that have helped to link Canada and Slovenia. Slovenia has recognized the efforts of many individuals and organizations in Canada and has presented them with certificates of acknowledgement and thanks for their contributions.

The work is not finished yet. The Canadian Slovenian Chamber of Commerce with its increased participation every year includes over 50 Slovenian companies and over 20 Canadian companies that have benefited from this organization.

Last week, Friday June 24, over 300 proud Slovenians, waving their flags, participated in the annual Slovenian flag raising ceremony at Toronto City Hall. What a beautiful site to see, as the flag was being raised during the singing of the Slovenian anthem. This was the largest group to date.

I am very proud to be Slovenian, just like everyone else here. Our parents and grandparents came to Canada with no money, little education and did not know the language. Obviously, they did not see these as obstacles. Paraphrasing Jon F Kennedy, they did not wait to see what the country would do for them, but what rather what they could do to make Canada a better country. They taught their children respect and the benefits of hard work. Most Canadian Slovenians are very successful people and are willing to give back to the community.

Thank you all who have worked so hard from the beginning and continue preserving the Slovenian heritage, both through volunteering and generous donations.