

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH ARCHIVES: A REPORT ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE CANADIAN SLOVENIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Introduction

The Canadian Slovenian Historical Society (CSHS)/Kanadsko Slovensko zgodovinsko društvo (KSZD) started with no fanfare and the most meager of resources, but with energy and perhaps a naïve belief in its role within the community. In a sense, it has become the keeper of collective memory. The term, coined by Maurice Halbwachs in his seminal study *The Social Frameworks of Memory* (1925) posited that memories are formed through events that have affected society, although each member can remember individual aspects. Certainly emigration to Canada from Slovenia (in its various geo-political manifestations) informs the memory of all Canadians of Slovenian heritage. The work of the CSHS is to ensure that the memory, no matter how difficult or easy, does not become lost.

Mr. Stane Kranjc, a well-known and long time advocate for Canadian Slovenians, gathered a group of community leaders in the summer of 2003 to form the CSHS. Among the mandates of the society was the collecting and preserving of documents and artifacts that trace and record the history of Slovenian immigration to Canada. The intent was to have a record of Slovenians and their activities, past and present, from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific. The society developed its constitution, and formed a Board of Directors (all volunteers) and members.

Since 1971, Canada has had a federally sanctioned policy of multiculturalism. Briefly stated, this means that the government promotes maintaining the different cultures constituting Canada, and does not expect assimilation of peoples into one homogenous “Canadian” culture. Its legal counterpart, the Multiculturalism Act, went into effect in 1985.

Slovenians in Canada assimilate relatively easily into the hegemony. A plus in terms of language acquisition, schooling and employment, assimilation also means that other more dominant languages (especially English) and customs tend to diminish in the Slovenian community more rapidly than in communities that do not assimilate as quickly. Within one or two generations, what remains are fragments of language (most notably “kitchen” Slovenian) and some traditions (mostly revolving around food and folkloric activities). Assimilation represents a natural evolution of subcultures within a larger linguistic and cultural reality. In many cases, it is the academic world which works to ensure that

subcultures remain alive. In Canada, however, to my knowledge, there are no university programs where Slovenian culture and language form their own independent areas of study. Conserving “slovenian-ness” then becomes the purview of the community.

In the Canadian Slovenian community it has become evident that the Slovenian language and culture constitute the greater part of what second and third generation (and beyond) Canadian Slovenians have accepted as their collective identity, no matter what their level of linguistic or cultural proficiency. Although they may not, or no longer, speak the language of their parents and grandparents, they do not intend to cancel it from their identity and collective memory. Thus the idea of community archives under the aegis of the CSHS was born.

Building archives has turned out to be a daunting but paradoxically most satisfying enterprise. This brief report of how the CSHS took up the challenge of preserving Slovenian history in Canada will, I hope, encourage other groups to do so as well.

Archives rooms

From the outset, the CSHS volunteers who established the archives remained adamant that the holdings must be kept as professionally as possible already from the initial stage, despite the paucity of financial resources. They were also determined that the Archives room should be in an area readily accessible to the Slovenian community in Toronto and the environs, and that was not affiliated with any parish or cultural group. Consequently they approached the Board of Directors of Dom Lipa, the Slovenian residence for the retired and elderly, who were pleased to allow a storage room in their basement level for archives. The CSHS joined the Archives Association of Ontario (Canada) and availed itself of their archives advisor for infrastructure support. She tested air quality and humidity levels, and generously assisted in determining necessary requirements for shelving and work space. CSHS members themselves donated office furniture and some computer equipment. They prepared the room according to the specifications suggested by the advisor. There was no question that archiving supplies, including acid free boxes, folders, mylar envelopes and other similar equipment had to be of professional quality and acceptable archival standards. Again CSHS members donated seed money for these purchases. Since then, the CSHS has applied for various grants, both Canadian and Slovenian, which have all been gratefully received. The Urad Vlade RS za Slovence v zamejstvu in po svetu has always supported the CSHS financially and morally. And indeed the venture has grown successfully; thanks to the generosity of the Board of Directors of Dom Lipa, the Archives now include two large rooms with appropriate work space, meeting space, and adequate shelving.

Archivist

The CSHS members are all volunteers, with professions and commitments beyond the activities of the society. None of the original members was an archivist or historian. However, they eagerly accepted the invitation of the Republic of Slovenia to have some of their members attend a week-long archiving course given in Ljubljana. The course intended to teach Slovenians throughout the world how to preserve their heritage. The sessions were truly outstanding in organization, breadth of topics covered, and presenters. The Archives Association of Ontario also holds conferences and workshops, and CSHS members have signed up for these as well. In addition, they were fortunate to meet a young archivist just starting her career, who saw the opportunity to help set up archives from the beginning steps not only as a challenge, but as a way to enhance her own professionalism and reputation among Canadian archivists. Because she was not of Slovenian heritage, she helped overcome problems that arose as a result of language and cultural aspects taken for granted by CSHS members, but that required some explication for non-Slovenians. Eventually, she took up a time-consuming post as the head archivist of a major Church Archives, remaining as an occasional consultant and dedicated cheerleader for CSHS activities. By this time however, a new member with certificates in genealogy had joined the CSHS and was happy to take over as archivist. Small grants from various agencies allowed reimbursement of some of his expenses including mileage and archiving supplies. A larger grant allowed him to hire two summer students to help with data input, cataloguing and shelving. A more recent grant from the Trillium Foundation will permit the CSHS to continue offering a small stipend to the students.

Activities

The Archives of the CSHS are the first dedicated to the Canadian Slovenian Community. One of the initial activities was to ensure that Slovenians in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) recognized the society's name, intentions and independence from other community groups and organizations. Members contacted prominent community leaders and received some initial donations of documents and artifacts. It soon became very clear that donors appreciated the professionalism of the Archives; they immediately understood the importance of following correct archival bureaucratic procedures expected of all archives.

In order to make itself known to the wider community, the CSHS undertook various community activities.

KDO SMO? Program

Many donors have offered photographs of groups of Canadian Slovenians, mostly taken in the 1950's and 1960's. The pictures show groups of Slovenians at a number of events: picnics, Slovenska šola, concerts, plays. CSHS volunteers attend community events (bazaars, after church coffee hours, picnics) and ask people to help identify the individual faces. This activity never fails to excite, and volunteers have always had wonderful conversations with community members about the photos. Each photo is truly worth a thousand words, as the saying goes. Through this program, the archivist and student assistants have succeeded in identifying most of the people pictured. In addition, the volunteers have heard heart warming stories about the lives of those pictured, about their families and their friends, and have received additional accessions.

Povejte Nam Kaj Oral Histories Program

The numerous stories heard when showing photographs led to a need for oral history records. The CSHS undertook this activity under the guidance and training of our first archivist, and now the members themselves continue to train other volunteers. *Povejte Nam Kaj!* seems like such a simple phrase. It was meant to invite Slovenians to tell their life stories in colloquial, informal Slovenian, *kar po domače*, the way people would express themselves in their homes. The CSHS collects the oral histories of Slovenians in the GTA and captures them digitally through interviews in order to preserve them on disks housed in the archives. Volunteers ensure that each storyteller knows that his or her interview cannot be sold or traded or given away; interviews cannot be used for any purpose but research. This program is presented through a special "recording" day event announced in advance to the community or through individual appointments with interviewers. Each recording session takes approximately two hours. Some of the stories are published in *Glasiło: The Voice of Slovenian Canadians*, a bilingual, bimonthly magazine. The latter, which require the written permission of the interviewee, are accompanied by photographs.

Outreach

As the CSHS has become more known among Slovenians in Canada, archival holdings have increased greatly, and requests for *Kdo SMO?* and *Povejte Nam Kaj!* events have grown. Consequently, members of the CSHS have also collaborated with Canadian Slovenian communities outside of the GTA by providing a workshop to help them with the process of oral histories, and with setting up their own archives and gathering archival materials. Workshops have been presented in Vancouver,

Montreal, and Winnipeg, and are scheduled for Edmonton, Calgary, and Halifax.

Library

The CSHS archives has received many books from donors. Those reflecting Canadian Slovenian history remain at the Toronto site. Thanks to a generous offer from St. Gregory the Great Slovenian Church in Hamilton, Ontario, a large room has been set aside for a library of Slovenian language books. These are only the initial stages of library building; the road ahead remains a long one.

Volunteers

The work of helping the Archives grow depends on the generosity and good will of volunteers. The CSHS has been fortunate to attract people from various walks of life who believe that Canadian Slovenian history should be preserved appropriately. The archives, it should be noted, are not the only project of the CSHS. For example, the book committee has worked diligently on a volume illustrating the history of Slovenian groups and societies in Canada, a venture that we hope will soon come to successful fruition.

Thanks to indefatigable CSHS president, Jožica Vegelj, and her board of directors, the archives have enjoyed a good measure of success in the community to date. Much more needs to be done, but as the recent open house to celebrate the renovated and enlarged space has shown, Canadian Slovenians are eager to have this venture continue, and are pleased to support the work through donations of documents, photos, other multi-media records and artifacts.

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