

This speech was prepared and presented by Marjan Ulčar at the Slovenian Summer Camp in Bolton, Ontario for the 54th Slovenski Dan on June 30, 2013.

Topic: **IMMIGRANT PARENTS**
From Refugee Camps to Toronto



Mario (Marjan) was born in a refugee camp in Spittal, Austria and in 1950 the family immigrated to Toronto, Canada and settled in southern Etobicoke.

In the 1890's while Slovenija was still under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the first of three waves of Slovenians started to immigrate to various countries around the world including Canada. After WW1, when the Austrian Empire collapsed, Yugoslavia became its own country and outlawed communism driving the party underground. However, the communists were still able to control everything. This is the time when my parents' generation was born. It was also the time when the first immigrants were establishing themselves in Canada, U.S., Argentina, Brazil and Australia. They worked hard and although times were tough they always managed to send care packages and money back to their families in Slovenia as the world headed into The Great Depression in 1930. As a result, Canada's borders were closed to immigrants.

In 1941, Italy, Germany and Hungary invaded Yugoslavia from all sides. At this time, there was talk of men congregating and gathering arms secretly. Soon, it became apparent that these

partizani were actually communists. They had compiled a death list of people opposing their ideas.

Although our parents were teenagers when WW II broke out, they wanted to protect their homeland from communism and formed the domobranci.

At the end of WW II, when Germany was defeated, the Germans retreated from Slovenia. The communists immediately took power. Since all the anti-communists were already identified and blacklisted, they had no option but to abandon their possessions and flee for their lives or face certain death like so many before them. There was not much time to pick and choose what was to be taken on this exodus. The communists were ruthless and they were zeroing in on the villages. They were killing people and burning houses as they advanced. The panicked villagers made their way towards Ljubljana. The journey was difficult and exhausting leaving everyone hungry, and full of despair. As they moved north to the Austrian border, they had to either go over the mountains or walk 3 hours, through a 2 Km cold, dark and muddy tunnel. Some 30,000 Slovenians made this long gruelling trip which lasted over a week wearing the same clothes they left with.

In the Camp

When in Austria, the British military directed the refugees to an open field in Viktring. Major P. H. Barre, a Canadian in the British military, was responsible for organizing a temporary refugee camp. After a few weeks, they were informed they would be moved to Italy by trains. But they did not know that at the border, the British were handing over the Domobranci to Tito's Partisans. Night after night the shootings continued. Hundreds of mass graves such as Kocevski Rog are known to exist. More domobranci died after the war than during the war. In fact over 12,000 domobranci died thinking they were going to a safe place. When it was realized they were being slaughtered, the people at the camp went to Major Barre explaining the situation. He was shocked and disgusted that he was unaware of the deceit by his superiors. There were no further returns to Italy, thus sparing 6,000 lives.

The remainder of the refugees in Viktring were moved to four other camps. With great apprehension, they relocated to Spittal, Lienz, Judenburg and Sankt Veit.

At this time, the UN was trying to find countries that would accept these displaced persons. By the time it was all over, the UN was able to resettle 1 million refugees from 900 camps throughout Europe. Canada accepted over 167, 000 of these displaced persons, which were referred to as DPs.

The camps were multinational. Upon registering at the camp each refugee was given a DP identification card. They were now officially stateless and without rights. However, they were not prisoners in camp. If the refugees wanted to locate family and friends, they were allowed to move between camps, however they had to register first. Eventually, similar nationalities and religions assembled in the same camps.

A representative was chosen to be in charge of each barrack with many rooms which had capacities between 10 to 30 people. Not everyone got a bed. The refugees would volunteer for various functions depending on their skills. Those that could cook, would maintain the kitchen. The teachers would teach, etc.

Occasionally, the Red Cross would bring used clothing that would then be distributed amongst the people in a fair and organized manner. Because of overcrowding and poor hygiene, there were fears of an epidemic of typhus. As a preventative measure, the refugees were periodically sprayed with DDT. They were also vaccinated against small-pox.

Those who had completed high school were allowed to move to a student displaced-persons camp in Graz, Austria.

Many of the refugees formed lifelong friendships and some even got married in the camps. I would like to say they came to Canada for their honeymoon, but it wasn't that easy. Because our parents were in these camps for several years, some even started a family. In fact my sister and I were born in the camp along with many others.

As more countries accepted displaced people, the camps slowly started to close. Country representatives would interview the displaced person to determine their skills and ensure they were healthy and free from disease like tuberculosis or typhus. Once accepted, the British troops drove the displaced person to the train station where they would wait to board a ship.

Working the Contract

At this time in Canada, the Liberal Party was in power. *I say this because the Slovenians tended to vote for the Liberals because they were the party that accepted them into Canada.* The criteria for admission into Canada, was to commit to a one year contract or be sponsored by a relative who lived there. Education was not necessarily an asset. Single, healthy young men were most in demand to work as labourers on farms, forests, mining or railroad. Females could only be employed as domestic or hospital workers. These political refugees were the second wave of Slovenian immigration.

In the late forties and early fifties, there were great industrial and technological advances around the world. The first television came on the market and the first electronic computer was built. This was also the start of the baby boomers.

Before they boarded the ship, they signed a contract stating they would work for a one year period at a place selected by the Canadian Department of Labour. Since they could not read English, the translator also signed the document verifying they performed the interpretation in the native language of the immigrant. Then onto a boat for 8 to 10 days crossing the stormy Atlantic and docking at Pier 21 in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The ships were passenger boats with a capacity of around 1200 people. Sea sickness was common, but the accommodations and food were much better than in the camps.

In Halifax, the Canadian officials boarded the ship to process the passengers and each one was given a tag identifying the new destination city. After leaving the ship, the immigration process continued

and concluded with the passenger getting their landed immigrant status. They boarded the train and went west. It took about three days to get from Halifax to Union Station in Toronto. The train stopped at various cities where the immigrants disembarked according to the location of their contract. The farmers chose their labourers and took them to their farm or place of employment. The employer had to supply room and board and pay a monthly wage of forty-five dollars, which was half the wage that would be paid to a Canadian citizen. Depending on the employer, some had better experiences than others.

Since they did not have a choice as to which city or town they would be placed, most of our parents were spread all across Canada, working on the farms in the prairies, in the mines or forests of Northern Ontario, or on the building of the Canadian railway between Montreal and Peterborough.

Some of the immigrants felt lonely and isolated and the year just seemed to drag on. They were saving their money to sponsor their spouses and children who were still waiting in the camps. Once the contract was served, they were free to go wherever they chose. Many made their way to the Toronto area to reunite with other Slovenians where they were able to help each other find jobs and lodging.

Building the Slovenian Community

As the Slovenian community began to grow they welcomed Reverend Jakob Kolarič in 1948. Slovenian mass was celebrated at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church on McCall. A monthly magazine called Božja Beseda (Word of God) was published to reach other Slovenians all across Canada. To keep the values, customs and traditions of Slovenia they realized they needed to have their own place to congregate. Most of the Slovenians were scattered in the downtown area, so the location for the church had to be close to public transportation. The year was 1952, a second Slovenian priest Fr. Janez Kopač arrived in Toronto from China where the communists had expelled all priests. Under the guidance of Fr. Kolarič and Fr. Janez Kopač, the first Slovenian parish in Canada, Our Lady Help of Christians was born. In

December 1953, with the strong leadership of Janez Muhič, Ivan Marn, Ivan Kavčič, Franc Košir and the help of many many volunteers, the ground was broken. The construction of the hall and the church was completed in 1954 at a cost of \$ 86,000. (*The land cost \$9,700, hall \$37,876, church, \$38,765*) By this time, there were 240 families registered in the parish. (*1028 parishoners*)

By the way, in 1954, hurricane Hazel destroyed many parts of Toronto and the Yonge subway line opened in Toronto.

As the parish grew quickly, the church was home to many organizations which attracted young and old alike. Fr. Tone Zrnc was very involved with the youth directing plays and choirs resulting in refined concerts and performances. Stane Brunšek, Vilko Čekuta and Ciril Soršak were also involved in various productions and performances.

Then in 1957, Jože Kastelic bought 22 acres of land which he donated to the Vincentian fathers. This was the first Slovenian summer camp in Canada. Ivan Peterlin was the first president of the camp and the first order of business was to construct some out houses, a pool, clear the land to make it more useable and to build a 'Lopa'. Over the years Fr. Kopač proved to be the guiding light that united and motivated the people to make it the success that it is today.

In the mid 1950s, due to high unemployment in Slovenia, a third wave of immigration began. Most of these immigrants were trades people for whom there was a demand for in Canada. They did not have to serve a contract.

By 1957 the church had grown to 473 families, totaling 2,116 parishioners. So in 1959, Fr. Kopač gathered a few enthusiastic people in the Etobicoke area to start another parish, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. This was to become the largest Slovenian Roman Catholic church in Canada. However, it started with a mere 57 families. During the first couple of years, mass was celebrated in the basement of Christ the King Church. Stane Ulčar, my father, was president of the church committee along with people like; Jože Jaklič, Frank Osredkar, Dore Pleško, Stane Čermelj, Franc Petrič, Frank Anzelc, Janez Vičič, Tine Tekavčič, Franc Jereb,

Janez Šibenik and Felix Sebanč; they started campaigns to raise money. Donations came from all across Canada and also from America. Of course the major contributors were from the Etobicoke area where the church was to be built. Even though the wage was under \$100 a week, many people donated more than that. Then, once the plans were approved Tine Tekavčič, volunteered to be the general contractor. Janez Tratnik volunteered to be in charge of the brick layers and Anton Ferkul volunteered to be in charge of the carpenters. The love that went into building this structure was amazing. Many men volunteered over 100 hours of labour to be rewarded with the completion of the church in 1961. For many years Stane Ulčar, volunteered to do the maintenance of the church and the hall. Blaž Potočnik and Frank Cerar were heavily involved with keeping the youth engaged in various organizations.

Moving further west to Hamilton, a small group of Slovenians called the Society of St. Joseph had been congregating since 1934. However, by the late 50s that membership had grown to the point where they were ready to build a Slovenian church. So in 1961, Fr Alojzij Tomc of the Salesian order began the spiritual leadership. By 1964, St. Gregory the Great church and hall were completed under the management of Slavko Erzetič as the project manager and the many volunteers including; Janez Grebenc, Ivan Tanko, Rado Marušič, etc. This parish continued to excel under the leadership of Fr. Ivan Doberšek, Darinka Ferletič, Jožica Vegelj, etc.

In the early 60s the idea for Slovenski Dom was presented. This was to be used for meetings, gymnastics and sports. Again, many volunteers helped to get this project under way including the families of Dolenc, Turk and Markeš. The acquisition of a building for Slovenski Dom was completed in 1964 and is located on Pape Avenue in Toronto.

After 10 years, Marija Pomagaj had; 1135 baptisms, 503 weddings, 53 deaths

The foundation had been laid. But there was still a lot more to be accomplished. More summer camps, more organizations, various publications, etc all requiring endless hours of volunteering. Thankfully

people stepped up to the plate for the sake of the Slovenian community.

Over the years, people like; Ludvik Stajan, Frank Brence, Stane Kranjc, Mara Osredkar, Anica Resnik, and the list goes on, have also been pillars in our Slovenian community and continued with all of their volunteer work. I would also like to acknowledge everyone that has contributed in keeping Slovenia alive in Canada. We have a great mixture of people; strong leaders, dedicated volunteer workers and those generous people that provide the financial support to get things done.

The story began with our parents' generation being born after the first world war, growing up during the depression, and surviving the second world war. They were refugees in their late teens, so they had to grow up quickly.

Once they settled in Canada, they had the courage, the will and the determination to build a new future for their families. Their goal was to have their children embrace the Slovenian culture and be outstanding in Canadian society. Although our parents did not have much schooling, we have learnt a lot from them. Respect and attitude are characteristics they exemplified through their entire journey. They deserved to live happily ever after even if their lives were no fairy tale.

Slovenci smo ponosni. Naši starši so pokazali da se ne sme obupat, ne glede kako je hudo, ampak da je treba poiskati pot ki bo uspešna. Prišli ste v tujno v najhujših razmerah, brez denarja, brez šole in brez jezika. Kljub temu ste ustanovili in zgradili mnoge Slovenske prostore, kjer se lahko zbiramo s prijatelji. Vaša vera, zgled in trud je bil koristen, saj prva in druga generacija Slovencev v Kanadi sta zelo uspešni, kajti večinoma so šolani, imajo dobre službe ali vodijo različna podjetja, niso breme drugim.

Ta zasulga gre vam.

Hvala vam vsem.

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