

History of Slovenian Culture in Canada

by Dr. Tone Kacicnik

Thank you very much to the organizing committee of **Slovenski Dom on Pape Avenue in Toronto**, and especially to Oscar Koren, its vice president, who personally invited me to speak about the **History of Slovenian Culture in Canada**.

My name is Dr. Tone Kacicnik.

As a proud Slovenian living in Toronto, Canada for 54 years, it is my honour to give to you a brief history of our **culture in Canada**, which started almost one hundred years ago. I would also like to talk about how Slovenian immigrants integrated into the multicultural life of Toronto and across Canada.

Slovenians are the smallest nation among the Slavic speaking countries in Europe, of which there are many Slavic nations comprising a large territory. Our greatest poet romanticist, Dr. France Prešeren, highlighted this fact in one of his poems when he wrote: "*Največ sveta otrokom sliši slave*" (most of Europe's land belongs to Slavic speaking nations).

As a proud Slovenian, I say we may be small in number, but we are a very resilient, talented and hard-working nation.

Thanks to their achievements at international competitions, our Slovenian athletes have been placing Slovenia on the global map, winning medals in winter sports such as skiing and recently a first-place twice finish at the well-known prestigious cycling event "Tour De France". The country is a tourist destination.

Let's look at some history of Slovenians in Canada.

In the mid-1800's, the Slovenian missionary, Frederic Baraga, arrived in North America to minister to a growing flock of inhabitants along the

southern shores of Lake Superior. In 1853, Baraga was named the first bishop of Sault St. Marie. He was an accomplished multi-linguist and grammarian of Native American languages; he wrote both a dictionary and a grammar of the Ojibway language”, as well as writing volumes about his work among the people. Widely respected and known as the Snowshoe Priest, Father Baraga was much-loved by the Indigenous communities he served in the Lake Superior region.

Slovenian Culture in Canada can be divided into three waves.

The first large migration of Slovenians to arrive in Canada was one hundred years ago, after WW1 in 1920’s. At that time, Canadian provinces, especially Manitoba and British Columbia, were seeking young men to work on farms and railways. These Slovenians brought their culture with them and started to organize various cultural events.

Before the second world war, an estimated 4600 Slovenians lived in Canada. The most vibrant Slovenian community was in Kirkland Lake, Ontario, where in 1933 the first independent Slovenian benefit society, Bled Mutual Benefit Society, was established (named after Lake Bled, one of Slovenia's most picturesque Alpine lakes).

The geographical distribution of Slovenian people changed dramatically during and after WWII. This was partly due to the resettlement of Slovenians from the mining towns of northern Ontario to southern Ontario. Many settled on farms in the Beamsville and St. Catharines regions. Between 1947-1951, Slovenians immigrants arrived with a year long contract of obligatory work. When the contract ended, many settled in urban areas, especially Toronto and Hamilton. This was the second wave. The people began developing cultural activities based on old traditions with new ideas. The third wave of Slovenian immigrants arrived over the course of the next 20 years.

From 1951-1960, the group of Slovenian immigrants who arrived in Canada were many family members of pre and postwar immigrants, as

well as young men and women who were unable to find employment in their homeland.

Between 1960-70, many more Slovenians came to Canada for economic reasons. Most of them settled in Ontario. I was among this third wave.

The Slovenian culture in Canada blossomed during this period.

With the growth of Slovenian communities, social and economic structures began to develop. By 1945 the Bled Mutual Benefit Society had 13 branches across Canada. In the 1950s, two Slovenian credit unions were established in Toronto. Skilled craftsmen founded their own businesses, many in residential construction. Slovenian professionals established private practices to cater to the various needs of their people. After I had obtained my license to practice dental art in Ontario, I opened my dental office in downtown Toronto.

Cultural associations were founded in all major Slovenian settlements. Slovenian national homes and summer camps were built. In smaller towns, a single club could serve the needs of the local Slovenian community. In Toronto, a growing major city, various social, cultural and political associations began to emerge. Canadian Slovenians are predominantly Roman Catholic. The Vincentian Fathers from Slovenia arrived in 1949 and by 1954 the first Slovenian church was built in Toronto. The priests began publishing a religious monthly magazine, "*Božja beseda*" (The Word of God), which is still in print today. A second parish was established in Etobicoke in 1961, followed by church communities in Hamilton (1965), Montreal (1964) and Winnipeg (1963). Other major urban settings established Slovenian Social clubs.

For many, the parishes were the centre of religious, cultural, educational and social activities. Slovenian school classes were held on weekends. Choirs, drama groups, religious organizations and dance groups held their meetings or practices during the week, social events or fund-raising banquets filling the social calendars. I arrived in Canada with a university diploma from the Academy for Theatre, Radio, Film

and Television (AGRFT) in Slovenia. I had the honour of staging a solo performance during which I cited over 20 poems written by Dr. France Prešeren. Two performances were held in the church hall in Etobicoke, one in downtown Toronto, others in St. Catherines, Beamsville and Hamilton.

With the arrival of new immigrants from Slovenia cultural activities increased greatly. Research by Slovenski Dom has shown that there have been more than 160 books written by Slovenian immigrants in Canada. This collection represents a Slovenian literary cultural heritage in Canada.

The Slovenian community has welcomed a few talented poets. A 2009 Poetry Contest, held by Slovenski Dom, was won by Bernarda Cemas. Similarly, the poem, "Long Live Slovenski Dom!" by Cy Prezelj Jr. was awarded the first prize in another Poetry Contest. The community is enriched by its literary writers and skilled professional experts of varied specialties.

Slovenian culture in Canada has been documented in a film produced by Slovenian producer/director Janko Virant. His documentary film, "Slovenian-Canadian Roots", which he directed and produced, has been shown numerous times on Canadian television (twelve times) and in Slovenian and Canadian halls. There are a few budding film producers in the community.

Another expression of Slovenian cultural activity in Canada is through food, central to many cultures. Our multi-course banquets are legendary for the excellence of the variety of dishes. Desserts are always plentiful and deliciously sweet. *Potica* is a world-renowned specialty nut bread, often served at special occasions. The *kranjska klobasa* is a popular traditional food, a taste unique to Slovenia's culinary kitchens. Slovenski Dom organized Potica Challenges at the Seniors' Nursing Home, Dom Lipa, a few years ago. Ten to twelve potica baking teams would enter the challenge, each team submitting

two identical poticas. Poticas were judged by a team of four judges in front of an audience that also had a chance to sample and determine their favourite. After the winners were announced, the social communication continued. Note that Slovenians like to socialize.

Several Slovenian Canadian cookbooks have been published in Canada. The best known are Dom Lipa's Favourite Recipes, a collection of Canadian-Slovenian Recipes through past and present, the Slovenian Hunters & Anglers Club's CULINARY TREASURES and the recent MOYA Financial Cookbook, a collection of the community's most popular calendar recipes. Also of note in the, "Cookbook of Canadian-Slovenian Recipes (1855-2015)" by Stane Kranjc.

Music is an integral part of culture and Slovenian culture in Canada enjoys the talents of numerous musicians. Among the Slovenian bands entertaining us through the years - Veseli Vandrovčki, Veseli Pomurci, Matt Lebar Ensemble, Spotlight Orchestra, Walter Ostanek Band, Mladi Kanadčani, Niagara Button Boxers, Golden Keys, Ensemble Gregoric – to name a few of the many over the past 60+ years.

Not only do Slovenians enjoy dancing, but we also enjoy performances by Slovenian folk dance groups. Dancers can range in age from 4 years through to teens and young adults. One club even had a dance group of older adults performing very traditional folkloric dances. Dressed in traditional dress from various Slovenian regions and accompanied by Slovenian traditional music, sometimes live accompaniment but often by audio recordings, the dancers are delightful to watch. Nagelj dance group was among the first and it still operates today. Other known groups are *Mladi Glas/Planika* (Toronto), *Plesati* (Ottawa) and *Rožmarin* (Manitoba) among others that have operated over the course of multiple generations of immigrants.

Slovenians love to sing, and they sing well. Choirs have contributed to Slovenian culture in Canada. Along with the church choirs, among the best-known choirs in Toronto, have been *Fantje na vasi*, *Plamen*. and

Naša pesem. Outside of Toronto, some known choirs have been *Zarja* in Timmins, *Zvon* in Windsor and *Vigred* in Sudbury.

Maintaining their culture is important to Slovenians. They take pride in their choral singing, folklore dancing, traditional music, writing, fine arts and theatre. Slovenian communities across Canada have formed theatrical and cultural societies since their arrival at the turn of the 20th century. Toronto has been a central cultural hub since 1951, enjoying works performed and produced by leaders Stane Brunšek, Vilko Čekuta and the directors with the *Slovenska igralska skupina* (SIST - Slovenian Theatre Group). I directed and acted in three very popular comedies: *Glavni dobitek* (First Prize), *Martin Krpan* (a comedy about an exceptionally strong Slovenian in the former Austro-Hungarian empire) and *Deseti brat* (tenth brother). We had multiple performances across the greater GTA area and in St. Catherines, Beamsville and Hamilton.

Slovenians like to keep fit and active. We love sports, including soccer, volleyball, lawn bowling, skiing and hunting. In skiing we have often held annual giant slalom races for a variety of age groups.

The community supports various charitable projects in Canada and abroad, such as Victoria's Trust, Catholic Charities, Slovenian Missionaries and Slovenian old-age homes in Toronto and Hamilton.

According to the 2016 census, 10,295 people reported Slovenian language as their mother tongue. According to community estimates, 25,000 first and second-generation Slovenians are actively involved in ethnic organizations.

Although some Slovenians of the first, second, and third generations do not associate with Slovenian churches and organizations, they understand the language and keep close ties with relatives in Slovenia. Some live in places that lack Slovenian clubs. Adjusting for these factors would bring the total to between 35,000 and 40,000. The first and third

groups arrived primarily on economic motivations; the second group were primarily political immigrants.

Slovenians entering Canada in the 1960s and 1970s had a much easier time compared to those arriving earlier. Many knew someone here who could help them. Also, since the Yugoslav government no longer restricted emigration, many had left legally and could return home at will. This group was better educated and could get jobs as skilled craftsmen, which Canada badly needed. Many remained in Ontario, where friends and relatives could help them obtain work in factories and in construction.

With the growth of communities, especially in Toronto, an economic infrastructure began to develop. In the 1950s J.E. Krek's Credit Union and the Slovenia Parishes Credit Union were established in Toronto. Doctors and lawyers catered to their countrymen, and craftsmen opened up businesses, many of these businesses are still concentrated in Toronto. There are a sizable number of construction and manufacturing firms, along with skilled tradespeople and professional associates in the service industries. Many enterprises are family operated. A few Slovenian businesses have made their marks in the larger Canadian economy, most notably, Marineland amusement park in Niagara Falls, owned by the late John Holer. Top Grade Molds, JM Die Limited, Condu Electric, Brado Precision, Just Aluminum & Glass Inc. and many others.

The political situation in Slovenia in the early 1990s led to several new organizations being formed in Toronto. The *Kanadski slovenski kongres* (Canadian Slovenian Congress), was founded in 1989, with branches in Quebec (Montreal), Ontario (Ottawa), Toronto, Hamilton, Windsor, Thunder Bay, Manitoba (Winnipeg), and British Columbia (Vancouver). A member of the World Slovenian Congress, its objective was to promote the interests and aspirations of Slovenians in Canada, to defend the rights of Slovenians in their homeland and abroad, and to

promote friendship between Canada and Slovenia. The Slovenian Canadian Council represented several organizations founded by political immigrants, including the Slovenian National Federation which published the monthly newspaper, *Slovenska država* (Slovenian State).

Launched in 1990 in Toronto, *Vseslovenski kulturni odbor* (VSKO – All Slovenian Cultural Committee) continues to represent a majority of Slovenian organizations in Ontario and co-ordinates various activities nationwide. Operating within the VSKO committee are *Glas kanadskih slovencev* (radio program, Voice of Canadian Slovenians), *Glasiilo* (Slovenian magazine), *Slovenski informacijski center* (Slovenian Information Centre), and *Slovenski sklad* (Slovenia Relief Fund).

Maintaining their culture is important to Slovenians. The first Slovenian Canadian cultural association, *Lira* (Lyre), founded in 1927 in Windsor, had an active drama section and a choir for a few years. In the 1930s, the centre of cultural activity was Kirkland Lake, Ontario, where the *Slovensko pevsko in dramsko društvo Triglav* (Slovenian Choral and Theatre Society, Triglav) was active until 1960; members produced concerts and plays in their town, as well as in Timmins and Noranda.

Among several short-lived periodicals, publications still in existence include *Glasiilo* (published by VSKO), *Lovski vestnik* (Hunters' Yearbook; Toronto, 1979–), published by the Slovenian Hunters and Anglers Club of Toronto; *Slovenska država* (Slovenian State; Chicago and Toronto, 1951–), produced by the Slovenian National Federation of Canada to promote the anti-Communist sentiments of post-World-War II political immigrants; and *Božja beseda* (Word of God; Toronto, 1950–), a religious monthly launched by the Slovenian Vincentian Fathers.

Articles written by Slovenian Canadians have appeared in periodicals and newspapers in Slovenia, Austria, the United States, and Argentina.

Slovenian radio programs have provided information on club activities, promoted Slovenian music, and helped preserve the language. In 1965 Frances Starchev started her daily program, "Caravan of Friendship," at

Toronto's multicultural CHIN FM, aimed at immigrants from Yugoslavia. After the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991, Frances had a weekly CHIN radio program until her retirement in December 1997. VSKO took over the radio program and between 1977 and 1986 a weekly evening radio hour, sponsored and produced by Radio Club Slovenia, focused on news from Slovenia and communities in Canada, community announcements, and ethnic heritage. Since 1991, VSKO's "Voice of Canadian Slovenians" has continued to produce a weekly radio hour. For five years, I was a producer of programming.

In Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton, and Winnipeg, parishes have run Slovenian-language schools since the parishes were founded. In other places, Slovenian clubs staffed and housed language schools when numbers justified. Slovenian schools provide the basics in Slovenian language, history, geography, and literature. The peak period for these schools was in the 1960s and 1970s. Between 1961 and 1986, 900 children were enrolled in the Slovenian school at Our Lady of Miraculous Medal in Toronto. Although immigration has significantly declined and registrations decreased, Slovenian language classes continue to operate for both children and adults. Until 1995, the Slovenian language classes for adults were taught by Blaz Potocnik and Mimi Radovan. In 2010 Slovenski Dom took over the administration of the Slovenian Language Classes for Adults. These classes continued until 2019 when they were placed on hold because of COVID-19. In 2020 a Slovenian language Tutoring Program was organized by Slovenski Dom which connects Canadian-Slovenian students with tutors in Slovenia. They meet weekly over videoconference platforms.

Thus concludes my brief presentation of the history of Slovenian culture Canada. Slovenians in Canada are a proud and resilient people. We love our language, our culture, our heritage, our businesses and our identity. We have been highly regarded by Canadians in the multicultural mosaic of Canada.

