



OUR STORY

NAŠA ZGODOVINA



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Renewal, Reflection and Visionaries

Slovenia Independence Day, 2025 was especially joyous at Dom Lipa Slovenian Retirement and Long Term Care Home in Toronto, where we gathered to celebrate and witness the blessing of its newly restored kapela.

The Dom Lipa outdoor Kapela was completed in 1998 as a shrine to Our Lady Help of Christians (Marija Pomagaj). Vili Čekuta drew up the original design and commissioned the mosaic of the Blessed Virgin. Darko Medved donated \$10,000 to have the shrine built on the grounds of Dom Lipa. On March 7, 1999 his Eminence Cardinal Ambrožič blessed this sacred space for spiritual reflection.

Over 25 years, outdoor exposure took its toll on the kapela and grounds surrounding it. Cveta Arhar-Stojko, who has devoted time to Dom Lipa since its very conception (including the founding Board of Directors), noted the deterioration. Something had to be done!

Staff were overwhelmed with responsibilities, Dom Lipa Family Council stepped in to assist. The Council is a group of caring family members, friends of residents and community members who want to ensure the quality of life, well-being and happiness of all residents of the Home. Arhar-Stojko collaborated closely with the group (especially Josephine Muhič-Pelletier) and generously funded the removal of overgrown shrubbery, the creation of a new design, landscaping and planting. With kind assistance from Ivan Marentič, Fr. Leopold Valant took charge of the restoration and new images of the Blessed Virgin.

After months of planning, the day of the Blessing went smoothly thanks to many willing hands. At Dom Lipa, Jolante Linde and her staff prepared for the day, culminating in helping residents gather in the garden. Special thanks go to Melissa Šuštar and Ana Jankovič who worked tirelessly on all the details. Family Council member Mojca Dimperio, joined by her Končan family, The Dom Lipa Singers, provided familiar music greatly enjoyed by residents and guests. Council member Majda Resnik's reading accompanied the beautiful Blessing Ceremony led by Fr. Leopold, supported by Fr. John Nosan. Attendees received medallions of the Blessed Virgin Mary. There were raffle prizes, "miške" (freshly baked that morning by Ana) and cake with strawberries. Everyone received home baked cookies to take with them, thanks to Family Council members, who also assisted at the event. It was a beautiful day bringing a joyful Slovenian Catholic community together, 26 years after the first ceremony.



Residents, staff and visitors are newly inspired to reflect and pray at the lovingly restored Marija Pomagaj Kapela. We are forever grateful to the early, dedicated community members who envisioned its creation over 25 years ago. They inspire the next generation. In that regard, Dom Lipa welcomes your friendship and time (*reach out to: s.gibicar@domlipa.ca or info@domlipa.ca*) as does the Dom Lipa Family Council (domlipafamilycouncil@gmail.com). And of course, visit www.ourladyofmm.com to learn more about the many opportunities the Slovenian parish has to offer all ages.

By: Dorothy Lenarčič

EARLY YEARS - Slovenians in Canada: The Building of Marija Pomagaj Church in Toronto

Fr. Jakob Kolarič and Fr. Janez Kopač were instrumental in the building of the first Slovenian parish in Canada. In February 1953 they found property in downtown Toronto and requested permission from the Archdiocese to establish the Slovenian parish called Marija pomagaj/Our Lady Help of Christians. The construction contract was awarded to architect Peter Dimitroff, engineer Viktor Skof and building contractor Franc Stojc. From February 10, 1953, Slovenian baptisms, marriages, and funerals were recorded at this new parish rather than at Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Italian parish) as had been the case

since 1949. Fundraising for a new church and community centre began when Slovenians arriving in Canada after WWII moved to and settled in Toronto. Slovenians from all parts of Canada and various parts in the United States send contributions for this project. Much of these funds were carefully enumerated and published in the monthly publication, *Božja beseda*. According to our records, the construction costs totalled \$37,876.00 for the hall and \$38,765 for the church building.

On December 7, 1953, the first shovels were put in the ground to begin the digging for the parish hall that was to be erected

beneath the church. This quick action had been made possible by the generous support of the parishioners who assisted with monetary contributions, as well as with their labour, their time and building material donations. By October 23, 1954, the hall was ready for community events. By December 8, 1954, the construction of the church was completed and Škof Gregorij Rožman celebrated the first mass.

We would like to hear from our readers, how you or your family came to live and settle in Canada. Please send your memories to ourstorymcek@gmail.com.

MC

This column creates a digital repository of artefacts that are important to the history of Slovenians in Canada but that the Archives of the CSHS cannot accept because of limited space, other restrictions, or the donor's wish to keep in their family.

Treasured Boxes

Helen, a Member of the Board of the Canadian Slovenian Historical Society, was brought up in the Alderwood area of southern Ontario with her three brothers. She recalls that her parents ensured that their children were raised in a family that cherished their Slovenian heritage. One memory that all the siblings share is that in their parents' bedroom there were special boxes which could be found on the dresser or on the closet shelf. Helen cherishes the contents of these wooden boxes, but also the boxes themselves because together they pay silent witness to the life of her family before and after her parents settled in Canada.

Mama's small box is circular, a fine antique example of the Slovenian tradition of *suha roba* usually originating from the Ribnica region, a craft now more than 600 years old. The brightly painted scarlet carnation motif adds a cheery focus against the smooth blonde sheen of the wooden lid. The carnation is the national flower of Slovenia, so the box likely reminded Mama of the land of her birth. Carnations are considered symbols of love and devotion, most appropriate as a remembrance of Mama who had shown so much love and devotion as she raised her family in a country so far and so different from her own upbringing in Slovenia. She had left the small village of Lom pod Storžičem in the wake of the Second World War, after the family home was ransacked and all their possessions confiscated by partisan soldiers. Although the wooden trinket box was probably acquired later, during a return visit, after she had already settled in Ontario, she considered it rather special and used it only to store her brooches and her treasured *svetinjice*, the little religious medals that are also symbols of devotion.

Ati's boxes are rectangular, the size of a manila folder in length and width and about five centimeters deep. They are much older but still show their elegant craftsmanship. While Mama's round brooch box was likely purchased in a souvenir shop in Slovenia, Ati's boxes are one-of-a-kind. Helen's father, who came from Koroška Bela, made them himself, using time-consuming marquetry techniques to decorate the

lids with a border and with a design. He built the boxes, then painstakingly beautified the lids with small pieces of wood veneers of different sizes and of different woods, carefully glueing the patterns to a wooden base. He added hinges and a lock. He then sanded and varnished the boxes to give them a smooth walnut burnish. This kind of detailed work requires familiarity and expertise with different types of woods and wood grains, which Ati had since he was a cabinet maker. In addition, marquetry also requires much patience, an artistic eye and careful, very precise cutting. Love and devotion were motifs that appealed to him as well, as the center design of one of the boxes is highlighted with a heart within a heart. A similar box, tucked away on a closet shelf, held important papers including passports, Ati's work cards, his pocket calendars, his diaries and memories of his life in Slovenia as well as a little book of vocabulary lists to help him learn English. Its lid is decorated with a large four-point star, again done in exquisite marquetry tiles with a border similar to the heart box. Ati never spoke of these handmade boxes, but the family was certainly always aware of their existence. He used these beautiful containers as a personal archive where he preserved all his memories of life in Slovenia, as difficult and traumatic as they were. In Canada, he continued his story, making notes on papers of various sizes, all filled to the margins with his distinct cursive writing.

Thanks to the keepsake boxes and their contents, Helen continues to feel a deep connection to her parents. By writing his stories, Ati has given his children and grandchildren the opportunity to cherish his memory and that of his wife. Somehow, he had guessed that his handmade wooden coffrets containing a jumbled confusion of papers would one day become not only well-crafted pieces of art but also a life story to be treasured. If you would like to read more about how Helen's family arrived in Canada simply click on past editions of this newsletter:

https://www.slovenianhistorical.ca/_files/ugd/0c0dcd_f05137f383ac47069efdea433547c5c1.pdf

or

https://www.slovenianhistorical.ca/_files/ugd/6d276c_4dbc46efacd7480c9e7a44cdabeb8d7b.pdf

Anne Urbančič



Dr. Strle speaks of her recent book: *Kanadskim sanjam naproti. K zgodovini migracij Slovencev*. Ljubljana: Zalozba ZRC, 2025.

The book is available publicly at: <https://omp.zrc-sazu.si/zalozba/catalog/book/2178>

AU: Did you find notable differences among the various groups of Canadian Slovenians across time and across space as you did your research?

US: This is a very comprehensive topic. Internal differences to me seem to be a natural feature of any group that has a common denominator. This is not a peculiarity of Canadian Slovenes, similar principles can be found among Australian Slovenes, American Slovenes... And the history of Canadian Ukrainians, who form a very strong community in Canada, or Slovaks, who are fewer in number, is also internally very diverse, and so forth. Each individual is shaped by very specific circumstances, determined by their place of origin, family environment, generation, social position, education, religious affiliation, political background, gender, profession, and the list goes on. And a large part of these circumstances, which also influence our values, memories, and personal affinities, can change over time.

I can tell you that, in general, the experiences of Slovenes from the two broader migratory waves differed greatly. One wave came to Canada after WWI, in the 1920s, the other after WWII. But at the same time, the general circumstances in Slovenia in those two periods were also very different, and Canada also had different principles of immigration and integration policy. And, of course, life was different in Canada if you lived in the countryside or in urban centers. The Canadian provinces also had different social and economic needs and therefore different attitudes towards immigrants.

When the US imposed immigration quotas in the 1920s, many immigrants from a war-torn Europe plunged into a serious political and economic crisis headed for Canada. But the crisis loomed, and in time, it also hit Canada. In such circumstances, the immigrants were in a very poor position to make something of themselves, and mostly lived hand to mouth. Since Canada did not have a well developed trade union movement to stand up for workers, quite a few individuals sympathized with labor movements. The few Slovene-Canadian associations established in the interwar period were actually support associations.

WWII kicked the Canadian economy back into gear. But the post-war period saw strong refugee flows in Europe (and the

rest of the world), which reached Canada. From the late 1940s, Canada also received many refugees from Slovenia who had either fled their homes because of the communist regime, or because of the very poor economic conditions in a autocratic and ruined country. During the war, Slovenian society suffered extreme occupation repression by the three occupiers, a severe civil war, and, in the end stages, Allied bombing. At the end of the war, it was both badly damaged physically and impoverished demographically, and there was major socio-political upheaval. It took almost a decade to restore a semblance of normality to life. Canada, meanwhile, grew economically out of the war, and after the war, when it established a peacetime economy and set a sound immigration policy, it also strengthened demographically. It was also involved in the Cold War partition and did not accept communism. Many who came to Canada were, or eventually became, opposed to the Yugoslav regime.

AU: How was the situation of women different from that of men who emigrated?

US: Whether in Canada or Slovenia, women were subordinate to their husbands and fathers in traditional society, and for the most part, this remained constant until the middle of the 20th century, and is very evident throughout historical sources. Of course, there have always been exceptions, but the traditional subordination of women manifested itself, in particular, in the division of labor, and in the various activities between the public and the private sphere. Provided they worked, immigrant women were employed in the sphere of domestic aid, as nurses in hospitals, also in the fields, in factories, and in various service sectors. They were also paid less. Many of them did not go to work at all and devoted themselves to child-rearing and homemaking. Ideally, it was the man who had to provide for the family, but in the case of socially weak immigrant families, women had to work as well. Interestingly, during WWII, women were encouraged to work in sectors important to the war economy and were

given a number of social security benefits when they were employed, but after the war, these privileges was abolished by the state. Already after WWI, and especially after WWII, modernizing elements began to mix into traditional social patterns. Major changes came about with the coming of age of the baby-boom generation, who, from the late 1960s, began to rebel against the established values of gendered lifestyles as ossified and outdated. To some degree, this has also had an impact on immigrant societies.

AU: Canadians often held xenophobic stereotypes about immigrants. Did Slovenians in Canada have stereotypical attitudes towards Canadians? What did you discover about these?

US: To be honest, I haven't dealt with stereotypes and representations of Slovenes in Canada, so it would be difficult to say anything with real substance. What I can give are rough impressions from the sources that I've obtained, and even these vary a lot from person to person and also very much reflect their zeitgeist. I can confirm that quite a few people talked about a kind of coldness and narrow-mindedness towards them as DPs, but on the other hand, most of them expressed great satisfaction at becoming Canadian citizens and, as such, part of Canadian society.

AU: Can you briefly describe some of the oldest social groups established by Canadian Slovenians?

US: The first officially known such society in Canada was founded in 1933 under the name of *Vzajemna podporna zveza Bled / Bled Mutual Benefit Society* which branched out considerably in the following years. Before that, there were American branches of the KSKJ or SNPJ active in Canada, and it is possible that Slovenes in Canada also socialized on a Slavic basis (in the Austro-Hungarian period and during the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes). There were also a number of informal associations that were formed out of a need to socialize with their compatriots. The social life of Canadian Slovenes is very impressive, but you already know this well, maybe even better than I do.

(Interview to be concluded in next issue)

BALINANJE

Bocce ball, known in Slovenia as 'balinanje', is a game with roots in the ancient Roman Empire. Ljubljana, known as 'Emona' by the Romans, was part of the Empire where balinanje was popular. It evolved in the 18th century to its present form. The name 'bocce' comes from the plural form of 'boccia' which is the Italian word for 'bowl'. Today bocce is played worldwide.



Written rules date back to 1753 as outlined in a book by Raffaele Bisteghi. Traditionally, balinanje was played on natural soil courts measuring about 27.5 x 2.5-4 metres. Courts could be constructed from wood or stone or could be portable units. Traditional balls were made of wood, metal, or baked clay, spherical in shape, lacking any inbuilt bias.

To begin the game, a smaller ball or balinček is thrown. The object of the game is to position as many of one's team's balls close to the 'balinček'. Players are permitted to knock out either the balinček or their opponent's ball to secure a favourable position. Accuracy is key to this sport. In the Slovenian tradition, the game is played to 21 points.

Bocce ball is gaining popularity as a league sport worldwide and is now the

third most played sport among Special Olympics athletes. Although, balinanje is not an Olympic or paralympic sport there is potential for its inclusion in future years.

The sport is specially popular among seniors as it is non-contact and can accommodate up to 12 players. Mixed doubles and combination of different ages and abilities are common. All that is required is a court and bocce balls.

Slovenians in Canada have upheld the tradition of "balinanje" with great enthusiasm. In fact, there are several Slovenian resorts or letovišče in the Greater Toronto Area where the sport is played.

On the grounds of Dom Lipa, the long-term care home and retirement residence built by the Slovenian community for Slovenians, bocce players have gathered twice weekly for decades during the warmer spring to autumn months, to carry on the tradition of balinanje. Bocce ball is highly recommended for seniors as it provides exercise and opportunity for socialization.

Balinanje at Dom Lipa has evolved over time. Over the decades, the number of participants has dwindled. Originally the grounds included a small house and a cabin that provided shelter during rain and the opportunity to play cards. At one time, two courts were in use but now only one remains.

Despite changes, up to 20 senior men and women continue to gather for about 2 hours on Tuesdays and Fridays afternoons. Everyone is welcomed to join and participate in the game. Some are outstanding players, able to hit the opponent's ball out of their strategic locations to achieve great scores,

ultimately win the game. Others take the game less seriously but give their best effort. No matter one's ability, fun is had by all.

During the game, there is much joking, humour, play on words in both the English and Slovenian languages, a lot of laughter and smiles. About midway into the evening, the glasses come out, and wine or beer is shared, along with baked goods or other treats. This intermission also gives an opportunity to share information about upcoming community events, and on cooler days to warm those arthritic hands by the fire.

In the fall, a small campfire on the site is stoked, and chestnuts are roasted for all to savour, keeping the centuries' old Slovenian tradition alive.

During COVID, the participants continued to gather to enjoy the sport and its benefits. Meeting on a regular basis during COVID helped the players deal with the isolation imposed by the local health guidelines, gave them an event to look forward to, all while enjoying the outdoors.



As cold and shorter days arrive, the bocce court closes for the season. However, anticipation, for a new season remains and as soon as weather permits, a new season will begin.

By Marta Demšar

UPCOMING EVENTS

* **Sunday, November 23** - Photo Scanning Day at - 8:00am to 12:00 noon. We are seeking photographs from the early years of the establishment of the Slovenian parishes. Everyone is encouraged to bring their photos to help preserve and celebrate our community's history.

* **Saturday, March 7, 2026** - AGM 9:00am to 12:00 noon

* **Sunday April 26, 2026** - Luncheon and Part 2 of the video *Slovenians in Canada: Establishing Community*

Our display of the 70th anniversary of Marija Pomagaj Church is ongoing in the church hall at 611 Manning Ave., Toronto.

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