

Slovene Identity

The Canadian Experience

By Cvetka Kocjančič

Slovenia is situated at the cross-roads of Europe and because of its strategic geographical location, it was a prized possession of many European conquerors. Except for the short-lived existence of the independent Slovene state Karantanija in the 7th century, Slovenes never had their own state until 1991, when Slovenia seceded from the former Yugoslavia and declared its independence.

Slovenes could not identify themselves with the state they were living in, but rather with the language they all shared and the values and traditions passed down from generation to generation. The influences of more powerful nations somewhat changed the cultural and linguistic unity of Slovenes, which is still visible in the variety of different dialects and different national costumes and folklore dances, among other things. Although many Slovenes perished due to assimilation, there were still many more who believed that they owe it to their fore-bearers to preserve their language and their culture.

The great national movement began at the time of Reformation when the first Slovene books were written. In 1948, Slovenes developed a national program to unite all Slovenes. Slovene intellectuals gathered new ideas from other cultures and used them to enrich Slovene culture.

By the time Slovenes began massively emigrating in the middle of the 19th century, they had deeply instilled Catholic values, a strong sense of nationalism and a great felt love for their homeland. These values guarded them against assimilation, at the same time the cultural diversity Slovenes were exposed to throughout history, enabled them to adjust to the new lands and achieve great accomplishments.

The First Slovene immigrants arrived in Canada via USA from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was very hard for them to explain their ethnic identity to somebody who had very little knowledge of Europe and its history. In Pierre Berton's book *Klondike*, we read about Anton Stander, who in 1896 took a trip to Yukon and was among the four men who discovered famous Eldorado gold deposits in Bonanza Creek. He is defined by Berton as a "young Austrian from the province of Unterkrien".

Janez (Charlie) Planinshek who in 1910 came to live among Indians and Eskimoes in northern Canada and had very little contact with the civilized world up until 1928, was himself confused how to explain to Canadians his identity. He learned that after World War I, a great majority of Slovenes became part of the newly founded kingdom of Yugoslavia. By the time he made his widely publicized historic expedition from the Artics to the Tropics, he tried to explain to the reporters that he was a Slovene immigrant who originally came from the kingdom of Austro-Hungary, from a province that belonged to Yugoslavia. Reporters who never heard of the Slovene nation, or of Slovenia, interpreted his statements in their own way and called him "Yugoslovakian", "Yugoslovenian", "Slovenian", "Austrian". Farley Mowat even heard that Planinshek was Skandinavian.

When in 1924 the first Slovene immigrants began to arrive directly to Canada with organized transports, they still had a hard time explaining their national identity. By Canadian authorities they were registered as the citizens of the kingdom of Yugoslavia, and no evidence was kept as to their nationality. In Canada, they were scattered all over the farms of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and the forests of British Columbia. Seeking their own kind, they first identified themselves as Slavs, then they began to narrow down their identity to citizenship and then to nationality. Because their numbers were small, they socialized with other Slavs, and most of all with Serbs and Croats.

According to the stories of these first Slovene immigrants in Canada, a characteristic black hat was the outer sign of Slovene identity. As the number of immigrants increased and the situation enabled them to move to places of their own choosing (after completing a period of contractual work), they began to follow Croat immigrants to the mining towns of northern Ontario. In 1933, the first Slovene benefit society Bled Mutual Benefit Society was formed in Kirkland Lake, Ontario, to offer its members financial support in case of illness or accident. Also, the Slovenian Cultural Association Triglav was formed to cater to their cultural and social needs. Slovene immigrants were well aware of their national identity and they were determined to preserve their cultural heritage for the generations to come. A fifty-year old radiologist, born and raised in Kirkland lake, drifted away from the Slovene community in that small town, but all these years he kept his embroidered black velvet vest he wore at the age of eight, when he performed for club Triglav. For him, that vest, short black pants, black hat and black rubber boots (the best substitute for the authentic Slovene national costume) are the most memorable signs of Slovene identity, although as a grown up intellectual, he recognizes the values his parents instilled in him, mainly the respect for education, hard work and honesty, as well as the love for their homeland.

Canada kept no record of nationality of their immigrants, but rather of their former citizenship. The questions in the Canadian census forms referred to the "country of origin" or "the language spoken at home". For most Slovene immigrants who came from former Yugoslavia, this meant that they unintentionally identified themselves as Yugoslavs. Since many spoke English at home with their children, they identified themselves as English speaking immigrants from Yugoslavia. This is the reason why according to the 1991 Canadian Census only 8,050 Canadians declared themselves to be of Slovene descent, and of those only 2,750 persons considered the Slovene language as their mother tongue. The more realistic number of Slovenes in Canada, obtained by the self-estimate of individual Slovene clubs and organizations, is between 35,000 and 40,000.

Since the majority of Canadians never heard of Slovenia, Slovene immigrants would normally explain to them that they were from Slovenia, the northern province of Yugoslavia. In this respect, Serbs and Croats were more nationalistic, especially since the Serbo-Croatian language was often used as a means of communication among the immigrants from the former Yugoslavia at the workplace, if workers did not speak sufficient English. However, Slovenes had other qualities that would distinguish their identity: they were more business oriented, honest, hardworking and peace-loving. Their national pride was not in their association to their historical place in time, but rather to their common values which they were unwilling to compromise, even for the sake of fame and a more comfortable living.

A Slovene Canadian abstract painter, Andy Stritof who came to Canada in 1924 had risked his artistic success because he refused to accept the capitalist mentality. Heavily influenced by Cankar, Prešeren and other Slovene poets and writers, he could not envision Christian values being implemented in a society where people are forced to compete against each other and manipulated in such a way to want what capitalist society tells them they need. For him, the Slovene identity was to search for God through artistic activity; seeking human perfection and exploring the idea of a perfect society, the stubborn adherence to social/moral objectives of art that Slovene artistic predecessors set forth for him.

In this respect even ordinary Slovene immigrants were different. Most of them retained their religious and moral values: their love for their homeland, their hospitality, their social responsibility, especially towards their fellow countrymen, their God-fearing nature, their simplicity, honesty and generosity, their respect for work, their love for their homeland, their responsibility to transcend their culture and traditions, but most of all, their love to socialize, sing and dance in spite of the hardships they experienced in the new country.

These Slovene characteristics are not the most visible part of the Slovene identity. They are hidden within one's personality and Slovene immigrants are often quite shy about them. However, these are the characteristics that made Slovene immigrants good workers, good neighbours, successful business leaders, respected professionals, and dedicated community members.

Over two hundred and fifty Slovene businesses are listed in the Lovski Vestnik alone, mostly from Toronto, however, the number is incomplete, since not all Slovene business people advertise in this yearly publication. This reflects the courage and determination of Canadian Slovenes not only to cope with the new environment, but to thrive in it. Comparing this approximate number of Slovene businesses with the number of Slovene immigrants in Toronto, which is estimated at 10,000, it could be concluded that at least one in forty Slovenes owns his own business. Taking into account that these are mostly small family businesses and that most Slovene businesses employ Slovene immigrants, we could see clearly the economic structures Slovenes in Toronto have built for themselves. For the quality of their products and services they enjoyed the respect of the Canadian business community. Their success is largely due to the courage of Slovenes to take risks and to their natural talent to absorb knowledge from their working experiences and use it to their advantage.

The respect for education is an important part of the Slovene identity. Unfortunately, most of those who emigrated were not highly educated, however, their first priority was to secure a good education for their children. There is very little information on Slovenes who hold high positions in Canadian firms, however, they could be found among the doctors at Canadian hospitals, among the managers of large Canadian corporations, among university professors, computer programmers, lawyers, chartered accountants etc. Compared to Slovenes in the USA, Canadian Slovenes show very little interest in politics or military career.

Since the time of Reformation which gave birth to the Slovene culture, Slovene literature was very nationalistic, yet not chauvinistic. The Catholic church which was instrumental in promoting religion as well as culture, was in a way defending this nationalistic cultural stand, because it fostered self-confidence for a small nation and thus offered hope for the survival of Slovenes. Slovene immigrants experienced their emigration as a cultural shock and had a hard time coping with homesickness. They needed the company of their countrymen, their songs and dances, their traditions and their language as a defense mechanisms against homesickness. The role of the Slovene Church and the social support that different Slovene organizations provided was crucial for the healthy adjustment of the majority of Slovenes.

Slovenes who were better educated were better able to adjust to the Canadian way of living, however, they could not completely change their way of thinking, but rather retained their Slovene wisdom that guided them to lead a healthy life in a country where they were constantly bombarded with new technology, with passive entertainment, with consumer mentality and with psychological manipulation of every kind. Being better situated economically, many Canadian Slovenes could afford to visit Slovenia more often, and did not experience homesickness as a longing to see familiar people and places from their youth, but rather as a longing to return to that safe psychological environment, where people were more friendly, where life was simpler and more predictable. They experienced homesickness for the ethically and morally pure, healthy Slovene culture, free of pornography, crime and violence.

Ironically, this distinctive Slovene cultural identity was preserved by the immigrants, while culture back home has been invaded by foreign, mostly American influences. The desire of Slovene artists to succeed abroad, where American standards have been applied as a measure of good art, forced many Slovene artists to compromise, to bring too many foreign ideas into Slovene culture which are often confusing and contradictory to the Slovene way of thinking.

Canadian Slovenes, disappointed at the low quality of American entertainment, expect something better from the cultural groups from Slovenia, yet a few times, they were surprised and shocked to realize what fairly cultured people consider normal and suitable for family entertainment. The careless attitude towards Slovene language in Slovenia is much more noticeable by the immigrants than by Slovenes themselves.

Canadian Slovenes refused to identify with that kind of culture and cling to what Slovene culture once represented. This does not mean that they are old-fashioned, that they are stuck in the time gone by, but rather that they had seen the devastating effects absolute freedom of expression which leads to anarchy, therefore, they appreciate more the artistic freedom that comes with responsibility for the present generation and for the generations to come.

I suppose it has always been that way with Slovenes who as a nation experienced the feeling of inferiority, as it was observed by Prešeren already. Slovene literary artists appreciated their own culture better when they were living in a foreign land and had a chance to compare Slovene thought with that of other nations. They were the ones who felt self-chosen guardians of Slovene national identity, of unique Slovene culture.

There is not that many Slovene poets and writers in Canada. Besides books of a political and religious nature, souvenir books of different Slovene organizations and autobiographical books are the most common genre. Some autobiographical books and poems were written for very personal reasons, to get the author's experiences out in the open, while others were written with the purpose of sharing the author's experiences in order to enable others to learn from them. Some authors are aware that in the very personal writing the most universal wisdom can be revealed.

While the Slovene language is the most distinctive feature of Slovene culture, the conditions to cultivate it in Canada are far from favourable. Canadian multicultural policies have been encouraging immigrants to cultivate their own language and culture,

while at the same time they are creating conditions to subtly manipulate immigrants to assimilate of their own free will at a much faster rate than the previous generations of immigrants. The Canadian government pays for English as a Second Language Classes for the newly arrived immigrants and most of them take advantage of this opportunity. With the knowledge of English, they can land better jobs where they interact with other English speaking people, and eventually they speak English even with their children and often even among themselves.

Although a lot of Slovenes of second generation have enough basic knowledge to understand and speak Slovene, they hardly use it among themselves. The challenge of the Slovene community in Canada is to find new ways to transcend Slovene culture even to those who no longer understand Slovene language. The Slovene Church in Toronto already has a Sunday mass in English, and some Slovene clubs already use English or both languages at their club's functions and in their publications.

In the multicultural Canadian society, the Slovene language is not the defining sign of Slovene identity. Canadian Slovenes cannot even identify with the expression "Slovene", because the expression "Slovenian" is so widely used in everyday speech, as well as in official English names of Slovene clubs. The expression "Slovene" would present confusion at multiethnic festivals and functions. There, the emphasis is on the outer signs of Slovene identity: on national costumes, folklore dances, polka music, "potica" and "kranjske klobase".

Slovene Canadians have often been criticized by intellectuals in Slovenia for cultivating mostly "polka culture". Often, even Slovenska izseljenska matica was blamed for its part in it. The truth of the matter is that Slovene folklore groups, performing at multiethnic festivals, or Walter Ostanek's public admission that his music is rooted in Slovene folk music, made much more Canadians aware of the existence of Slovenes in Canada than the authors of the books *This is Slovenia* or *Slovenians in Canada*. The visiting polka bands from Slovenia undoubtedly inspired many young Slovenes not only to play in polka

bands, but to try their best to play the Slovene style of polka music and to pay more attention to the pronunciation of Slovene words. Also, the tours of Slovene Canadian folklore groups in Slovenia, regardless where they perform or who organizes their tour, makes many young Canadian Slovenes proud of their ethnic roots. This cultural connectedness with Slovenia instills in them a strong sense of national awareness which is not based on political convictions, but rather on common cultural heritage. A person who as a child willingly participates in the Slovene community is more likely to seek Slovene company and participate in that community as an adult, exploring various aspects of its culture and transcending them to their children.

Regardless of political and ideological differences, almost all Canadian Slovenes enjoy sharing the outer symbols of Slovene identity, as well as the Christian values that have made a distinctive and lasting mark on Slovene national character. They all share the love for Slovenia, whether they express that by wearing the national costume or by writing a poem about its natural beauty. The creation of the independent Republic of Slovenia in 1991 has increased awareness of the Slovene national identity and renewed national pride among Canadian Slovenes of all generations.

POVZETEK

Vse do leta 1991, ko je Slovenija postala samostojna država, so kanadski Slovenci težko definirali svojo narodno identiteto, saj Kanada ni vodila evidence po narodnosti priseljencev, pač pa po državljanstvu in po jeziku, ki ga priseljenci doma uporabljajo. Tako so se kanadski Slovenci uradno izrekli za Jugoslovane ali za angleško govoreče priseljence. Zaradi tega je uradno število Slovencev po kanadskem cenzusu iz leta 1991 samo 8.050, od tega le 2750 oseb, katerih materni jezik je slovenščina, medtem ko po

oceni Slovencev samih živi v Kanadi 35.000 do 40.000 Slovencev prve, druge in tretje generacije.

Kljub kanadski politiki multikulturalnosti, katere namen je pospeševanje jezika in kulture posameznih etničnih skupin, uporaba slovenskega jezika v vsakdanjem življenju kanadskih Slovencev, zlasti med mlajšo generacijo, vsebolj upada, zato so kanadski Slovenci postavljeni pred nove izzive, kako ohraniti slovensko kulturno dediščino in slovensko narodno identiteto. Zunanjo slovensko identiteto predstavljajo narodne noše, ljudski plesi, polka glasba, potice in kranjske klobase. To pa istočano vodi v oblikovanje slovenskega značaja - družabnosti, gostoljubnosti, podjetnosti, ljubezni do domovine in do krščanskih vrednot, ki so od nekdaj odlikovale slovenski narod.

Published in Dve domonini/Two Homelands, Ljubljana 1997