



OUR STORY

NAŠA ZGODOVINA



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Coming to Canada - Why a “Contract”?

by Dorothy Lenarčič

In reading the compelling stories of Slovenians coming to Canada, there is a common reference to a “contract.” I wondered, what was this “contract”? Why did they have it?

I discovered the contract was used only during a brief period of Canada's immigration history, when the largest group of 20th century refugees came to Canada.

After World War II ended, there were over one million displaced persons (“DPs”) in camps across Europe. Britain's priority was to identify war criminals and repatriate refugees, with tragic consequences for Slovenians as we know (see [Slovenia 1945](#) by Corsellis & Ferrar). Resettling DPs was eventually tasked to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and the International Refugee Organization (IRO, later to become the UN High Commission for Refugees, UNHCR).

Countries reluctantly agreed to accept the displaced. Canada's federal cabinet issued an Order-in-Council in 1946 allowing Canadians to sponsor spouses, siblings, parents and orphaned nieces and nephews under 16. This was of little help to Slovenians in the camps.

By 1947, Canada's economy was expanding and employers pressed Ottawa to bring in much needed workers. The government sent mobile teams to Europe to select acceptable candidates to serve one-year contracts. They were to work in agriculture, lumbering, railway maintenance, mining, heavy construction, iron manufacturing, textile factories and domestic service. After fulfilling their contract, they would be free to settle wherever they wished.

Slovenians who had worked the land at home had an immediate advantage. Those who were educated reluctantly abandoned what would have been promising futures as engineers, doctors, dentists, accountants and lawyers. Instead, many expressed their willingness to farm or do any physical labour assigned, in order to be considered for entry. Single women were accepted for domestic work.

Healthy applicants were examined for signs of strength and worn work hands. Once chosen, they were given complete physicals. Having passed the tests and political questions, the DPs were ready. Did they sign legal contracts at that point? This remains unclear to me. My mother kept scrupulous records, yet her only documents pertaining to the contract are two small cards, one

indicating her placements and the second stating she had completed her contract with the Department of Labour. I imagined a long legal document, not something resembling an old-fashioned library card!

In any case, once approved, DPs were transported to their assigned port and ship, sailing to Canada under the auspices of the IRO. On arrival at Pier 21 in Halifax, they boarded trains to their assigned towns and cities where they were met by their employers. Once there, conditions could be harsh. Hours were long, living conditions were poor, some employers withheld pay and some of our refugees were abused in other ways.

The use of contracts by Canada and other countries ended with the closure of refugee camps in the early 1950's. By the time Soviet tanks crushed the Hungarian uprising of 1956, the Canadian public had much better understanding of what our people had escaped. Instead of contracts, Hungarian refugees were welcomed with open arms.

As their descendants, we might question if the post-war settlement labour system was unfair and even cruel at a time of humanitarian crisis. Certainly no one should be underpaid, overworked or threatened, especially the vulnerable who had already been through so much. No one should have to hide their education and professional skills. Slovenians were among one million people displaced at a critical time and were fortunate to have made it to Canada. They arrived with no connections, language or money. They were given a roof over their heads and paid work while they got their bearings in a new country. Soon they would learn English, find better work, find each other and build a community of support, as they had in the camps. This time, it was safely in their permanent home, Canada.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR
NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

PLEASE DIRECT BEARER
WHOSE SIGNATURE APPEARS BELOW

CANADA

TO
NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT OFFICE
AT 139-140, Queen St., OTTAWA ONT.

OR, IF MORE CONVENIENT
TO NEAREST NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT OFFICE

Franciska Lenarčič
SIGNATURE OF BEARER

Franciska LENARČIČ
NAME IN FULL

INDEX No ON ARRIVAL 73-715	DATE OF ARRIVAL APR 24 1949
NAME	EMPLOYERS
MR. I. R. BOY	154, Stewart St., OTTAWA ONT.
<i>Mr. Robinson</i>	<i>R.P. City/Univ. Ont.</i>

DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR
CANADA

DATE OF BIRTH
5/2/20

REFERENCE No.
THIS IS TO IDENTIFY THAT 73/715/21004

NAME
LENARČIČ FRANCISKA

HAS DISCHARGED THE OBLIGATIONS MADE WITH THE
EMPLOYMENT OR TAKEN TO BEARER IN SPECIFIED
AGREEMENT TO CANADA, DATED PERIOD OF RESIDENCE

Franciska Lenarčič
SIGNATURE OF BEARER

MINISTER OF LABOUR
D. L. HENNING

APR 27 1949

Note: The term “DP” was used by some as an insult. Those who were anti-immigrant or who were themselves immigrants in the 1920s and had experienced the Great Depression, resented the refugees who were given jobs on arrival. In this story the letters are used only as a short form for Displaced Person, with no disrespect intended.

HEIRLOOM NOOK

by Anne Urbančič

This column creates a digital repository of artefacts that are important to the history of Slovenians in Canada. The Archives cannot accept some artefacts due to limited space, restrictions or donors opt to keep the item in their family.

Many years ago, Dorothy, one of the founding directors of the CSHS, received bedsheets and pillowcases, as well as an Easter basket cloth when she visited her mother's family home in Slovenia. Made from excellent cotton, all the items were part of a trousseau from decades ago, still in pristine condition. The sheet belonged to Dorothy's grandmother, the pillowcases and Easter cloth to her mother. What makes the items especially meaningful and unique is the embroidery, including the initials of the seamstresses. The monogram on the sheet shows cross-stitching in red thread, an unusual colour for this type of work which more traditionally had patterns using white thread on white cotton. On the other hand, the large pillowcases with horizontal buttoned flaps on the back, follow the tradition. According to Dorothy's mother, the two cases were made in the early 1940s when Slovenia was embroiled in the political crises, shortages and tragedies imposed by WW2. Nonetheless, young women gathered, especially on cold winter evenings, to talk, to relax, to comfort each other, and to sew. They were preparing items for their future wedding trousseau: a sign of hope and light in an otherwise desperate environment. In their haste to escape, these artefacts were left behind and Dorothy has wondered how many others of her mother's generation had to make similar choices about what abandon.

Embroidery (*vezenje*) is a Slovenian tradition, as the Gorenjski Muzej explains on its website. It was taught in elementary schools, an obligatory class under the reign of Maria Theresa of Austria which lasted long after the death of the Empress and into the 1960s. Bedsheets, bedspreads, tablecloths and napkins, and even underclothes were monogrammed with the initials of the seamstress. Many of these items were embellished with more intricate designs as well.



<https://www.gorenjski-muzej.si/razstave-in-dogodki/zbirke/vezenine/?lang=en>

The Easter cloth, possibly made by Dorothy's mother, has the year 1942 embroidered on it. It shows a religious motif of cherub angels, a chalice, a host with the letters IHS together with the prayer *Jezus bodi moja luč in vstajenje*, particularly appropriate for a cloth intended, likely, only to cover the basket of food taken to church for blessing on Holy Saturday. The stitching reveals a seamstress who is capable but still lacking in experience. We can deduce this from the uneven textures of threads on the cloth; in addition, the underside of the piece shows knots where threads were cut to change the pattern colour. This beautiful piece has six colours, including two shades of yellow. In a time of rationing and shortages of everything, we are left wondering where the selection of threads came from. The lace border is machine made and was added to the full perimeter of the cloth in hundreds of tiny, almost invisible stitches.

The pillowcases, which we know were made by Dorothy's mother, show the handiwork of a far more expert seamstress. The monogram and the motifs of heart and garlands are executed only in white thread on white cotton sheeting. The stitches, called satin stitches, follow the pattern with admirably consistent texturing for the monogram, leaves, and flowers. This type of stitch is never an easy undertaking since, as she embroiders, the seamstress must pay close attention to the length and proximity of each stitch in order to create a fully textured surface. Working this way with white thread on a white surface was most certainly time consuming. Furthermore, Dorothy's mother also decorated the corners of the pillowcases with a heart and garland done in a style called *broderie anglaise* because it was particularly popular in England. To do this, the main design was first outlined in a simple stitch, then holes were meticulously cut out around the stitched area with fine scissors, and the whole design reworked with a buttonhole or overcast stitch. The verso side of the design has no rough knots where thread was cut and seems almost as beautifully and painstakingly prepared as the right side, again a sign of embroidery expertise. While these pillowcases may have been intended for future sweet dreams, for Dorothy they are a reminder of the resilience and optimism of her mother in stressful and difficult times.

UPCOMING EVENTS

December 8, 2024

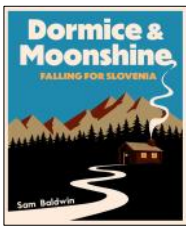
The 70th anniversary of Marija Pomagaj
Our Lady Help of Christians Church.

March 1, 2025

Annual General Meeting of the CSHS
location to be determined.

April 6, 2025

Luncheon and video #4 - "Settling in Canada"
at Brezmadežna Hall



An extract from the new travel-memoir: **'Dormice & Moonshine: Falling for Slovenia'** by Sam Baldwin. Mr. Baldwin, an English author fell in love with a 300-year-old Slovenian sausage-curing cabin in Koroška and moved to Slovenia. He has written for *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Independent*, and numerous guidebooks and magazines. *'Dormice & Moonshine: Falling for Slovenia'*, was released in June 2024. It is available from Amazon. For more information go to: www.SamBaldwin.me

Within two minutes of entering The Hunter's den, I was sipping on pure dormouse oil. The viscous liquid was the colour of pale whisky and had a mildly nutty taste. According to The Hunter, it was a *natural medicine*. He watched me uncork the small bottle and tip it to my lips, but his wry smile suggested that downing dormouse oil was probably not a local habit. This gift of rendered rodent had been his reply to the miniature bottle of Scotch I presented to him. I think he got the better deal.

During my research I had read that the Slovenian sport of dormouse hunting was something still practised. Yet when I asked my Slovenian friends, most considered my enquiry idiotic: "Who, Sam, would bother to hunt a mouse?"

I persevered and discovered that the hunting and eating of dormice - *polh* in Slovene - did indeed take place and I wanted to learn more about it.

The Hunter - who was also the president of the local tourist association - arrived at Snežnik Castle on a quad bike. Deeply tanned, with dark hair and wary eyes, his handshake was firm but brief. His office was decorated with dozens of hunting trophies: an eagle, deer and chamois skulls, and several stuffed dormice. One was re-enacting the moment of death, its head stuck in a trap; another was perched on a branch, eating a beechnut. Two pet *polh* lived in a cage in the corner of his office, but being nocturnal creatures, they were curled up, sleeping out of view.

In light of my feeble Slovene-speaking ability, The Hunter had invited Ola, his English-speaking assistant, to ensure my dormouse education could be delivered unhindered. They led me out of the office to a small museum comprised of two rooms. The first housed stuffed versions of Slovenia's major mammals: deer, bear, boar, weasels, stoats, wolves, lynx and fox. The second was a veritable shrine to The Cult of Dormouse. Packed with *polh* paraphernalia, I was sure it was the most concentrated collection of dormouse wisdom in the world.

On the wall hung an illustration of a 17th-century myth that was apparently once widespread amongst Slovenia's rural folk. It depicted a winged, tailed and horned devil, armed with a whip, driving a herd of dormice into the forest. The caption read: 'The Devil, the dormouse shepherd, clicked, whistled and made a hullabaloo while chasing dormice through the woods.'

Exactly why Beelzebub was chasing dormice and making a hullabaloo about it was not elaborated upon in any further detail.

To laymen, the edible dormouse (*Glis glis*) looks much like the grey squirrel. Though it lacks the squirrel's bushy tail, the dormouse is the same colour, a similar size, and also lives in trees, eating nuts and fruit. So it seemed quite reasonable to me to ask, "Do you hunt and eat squirrels too?"

But as soon my question had been relayed, the atmosphere instantly darkened. The Hunter went silent, frowned at me, then mumbled something to Ola. She glanced at me and mumbled something back to The Hunter. No translation was provided. It was as if I'd asked if he hunted and ate baby humans. Fearing my innocent question may have offended, I quickly changed course, sheepishly asking him about the origins of dormouse hunting.

"At one time, dormice were the only animal which peasants were permitted to hunt," he explained. "Everything else was reserved for the landowners."

Thus, these rodents were a welcome source of protein, fur and grease in days gone by. It takes thirty pelts to make a *polhovka*, the rather attractive grey-and-white striped hats topped with a furry bobble. Although it's said the Romans were keen on dormouse, the practice of eating them has died out almost everywhere apart from Slovenia, where people like The Hunter keep the tradition alive.

"Last season I caught about four hundred. That was a good year," he said. "It all depends on the beech nut. This season will be a bad year, beech nut levels are down."

The museum had an impressive collection of *polh* traps, and The Hunter explained the process. The traps came in many different shapes, but all were a variation on a small wooden box with wire or bands of metal providing the self-triggering deadly element. I learned that every dormouse hunter had a secret, personal bait recipe, and the staple nuts, apples and other fruits were often laced with their guarded concoction of schnapps, cinnamon or brandy. The traps were then hung from tree branches with the help of a long pole, and the wait began. After dark, the dormice came out to feed and were attracted by the bait, but the irresistible treat would be their last supper; as soon as it pops its head into the box, the wire spring is triggered, breaking its neck instantly. The dead dormouse is left dangling from the trap.

The days of needing the meat and fur for survival have long passed, so I asked, "Why do you still hunt the dormice?"

"There is much more to a dormouse hunt than hunting," explained The Hunter. "It's a gathering. We go into the forest just before dark and set the traps in the trees. Then we build a fire and wait. We check the traps two or three times during the night. One trap can catch a second or third mouse. When you go trapping, you feel the forest - the sounds, the smells. Most people don't spend time in the forest these days. The hunt takes us there."

His words resonated with me. I too had felt the primeval pleasure of sleeping in forests. As a boy, I spent many summers fishing and camping. But one day when I reached sundown without casting a line, I realised it was no longer hooking fish that I enjoyed. It was simply being surrounded by nature, sitting by a fire.

The Hunter laughed when I suggested that he might have caught ten thousand or more dormice in his lifetime. But he stressed that hunters don't take more than they need. And those that do are chastised by the dormouse hunting community.

"Last season, someone was boasting about catching a thousand. That's too many. Nobody can use that much mouse," he said, shaking his head. The greedy mouse hunter was apparently shunned and shamed.

Polh hunting is practised far less now than it was one hundred years ago. But it is not dying out. The Hunter's father took him, and he takes his own children. It's a family affair, he said, although more popular with men. As we made our way towards the exit, I spied a plaque that said the oil was 'good for the skin'.

"I should have very healthy skin then!" I said, alluding to my earlier swig.

With this, The Hunter broke into a deep laugh, his whole frame shaking. I was relieved; he seemed to have forgiven me for my blasphemous squirrel accusation. But it finally confirmed my earlier suspicion that neither he, nor anyone else in Slovenia, ever drank dormouse.

TRIP TO HALIFAX

PIER 21

by Rosemary Šušteršič

Our five day trip from Toronto to Halifax, Nova Scotia from May 18 to May 23, 2023 was a truly wonderful experience. Nine of us with a personal or familial connection to Pier 21, namely Henry (Riko) Zierfeld, Matija and Betty Sedej, Anica Plosinjak, Anne Leroux, Mary Sirk, Marta Demšar, John Bernik and myself, Rosemary Šušteršič welcomed a chance to visit this key point of entry to Canada.

At Pier 21 we recounted the moving journey many Slovenians including my parents took to begin a new life in Canada. We imagined the voyage on rough seas, for many on the ship the Marine Jumper. We reflected on how it felt to come to a new country as someone who fled from their homeland and was displaced because of the Second World War. We listened to Riko and Matija share their trials and triumphs as they commemorated the 75th anniversary of their exodus to Canada. We were pleased they were honoured and interviewed by Global TV. We also took time to share our dear stories, photos and mementos with one another.

Arrival in Canada via Pier 21 was a historic event. The Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 has kept memories alive for us. Two original doors where so many took their first steps onto Canadian soil are still standing. We saw what a typical cabin looked like and noted the medical exams and scrutiny that were part of the process of being admitted to Canada. We were able to access landing records and passenger lists and noted that, among other things, sometimes surnames were changed.

Out of necessity life changed upon arrival in a new country. Although displaced newcomers including my parents faced many hurdles they felt fortunate and blessed to come to Canada. They were thankful to receive their 'landed immigrant' stamp of approval as a stepping stone to freedom. They worked hard to build a new life for themselves and their families, initially first working on a yearly contract in lumber camps, on railroads, on farms, in needle trades and as domestic aides. A large percentage of displaced Slovenians were well educated and found life, especially at the beginning to be challenging.



After stepping onto Canadian soil Slovenians preserved their faith, culture and robust feeling of national identity. They valued their cultural traditions which they passed onto future generations. At the same time they were also proud Canadians who possessed a strong work ethic. They made significant cultural contributions and also fueled economic growth. With God's blessings these newcomers prospered.

Personally I have acquired a greater appreciation of my parents' life story and that of their generation as a result of our Halifax experience. The nine of us traveling together were united by our shared history and established even deeper friendships. In addition to visiting Pier 21 we also explored Peggy's Cove, attended Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral Basilica, enjoyed a boat ride,

viewed tidal waves, sipped wine and sang at several wineries and broke bread at various restaurants. We stayed in a fancy hotel and were treated to scrumptious buffet breakfasts. A special thank you to Marta Demšar and Anne Leroux for organizing our historic and commemorative journey to Pier 21, Halifax and the surrounding area in May of 2023.

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