

Slovenski Dan, Jun 30, 2019. "History and Heroes"

Dober dan in dobrodošli vam vsem .

Najlepši pozdrav našim častitem gostjem _____

in _____

in še posebno van vsem drugem, odrasli in mladi, ki ste prišli prostovoljno na ta lep kraj da bi skupno praznovali današni Slovenski Dan.

A very warm to our special guests _____

and _____

And I'd like to extend a special welcome to all the rest of you, ladies and gentlemen, young and old, adults, teens, children, who came out to this lovely place so that together we can celebrate this 59th Slovenski Dan.

When I was first approached to do this, I thought why me, isn't there anyone else, what could I possibly have to say? "Well you speak well and aren't afraid of the mic" I was told, "you'll do fine". And what shall I talk about?

"History" was the answer. Somewhat reluctantly, I agreed. The next question.... what could I possibly talk about? I'm not a history or political expert, I'm not qualified to speak on religious matters or the state of affairs in modern day Slovenia. So while brainstorming this presentation, I started thinking...

What IS Slovenski Dan? What do we celebrate, who do we celebrate? Is it Slovenian politics? Is it key historical figures past and present? is it events from 50, 60, 70, years ago? Is it circumstances that drove the exodus of our

parents and grandparents from their beloved homeland?

In a word, yes...that's all part of it, that's what gave rise to our community here in Canada, that's what shaped us. It is all important and deserves to be recognized and acknowledged.

But what it really is about is... us, you and me, all of us here today, young and old, and all ages in between. Us and our History in the Slovenian community here in Canada, here in Toronto and the GTA.

So history, what's that? One dictionary definition....

History is the total accumulation of past events relating to human affairs or the accumulation of developments connected to a particular nation of peoples; a record of significant events .

Sounds pretty deep doesn't it? I've been an "arts" person all my life. I have trouble getting my head around that.

So let's break it down..... history is a recording of the progress and achievements of a nation, of a people, of a community. And it's people who create history. People who contribute significantly to the history of the nation, the community they live in become heroes. And this led me to the thrust of today's presentation.

One definition of a hero is a person distinguished by noble deeds, outstanding achievements. That is an ordinary human being who went above and beyond in their contributions to society.

Another defines hero as a mythological or legendary figure, often of divine

descent, with great strength and/or ability.

Bear these definitions in mind because I'd like to take you on a journey through some of the history of our Slovenian community as I've experienced it throughout my life and some of the people I've encountered, who, in their own ways, strike me as heroes, some of them unsung, not acknowledged, and some of them recognized for their achievements.

Many of these folks came to Canada with next to nothing but with hard work and perseverance successful lives and families. Some established prominent careers, others flourishing business ventures. The one thing they all have in common is that they all strove to create and maintain active and meaningful Slovenian social community. They built churches to centre that community, to foster their faith. Various organizations and institutions were established to enrich and preserve the cultural, religious and social fabric of our community and to keep our Slovenian alive and relevant.

And then, some, my "unsung" heroes, folks who "under the radar", in many different ways contributed and continue to contribute to the growth and vitality of our community here.

I grew up a "Manning" kid in the 50's and 60's. My parents, Ani and Rudi, met and married in Toronto in the years after WWII. Both had fled Slovenia to escape the consequences of the war, lived in the Austrian refugee camps, worked their indenture periods in Canada, and gained their Canadian residency. My dad established himself as a heavy truck mechanic for Canada Packers, a major meat packing firm, and Mama stayed home to raise us kids. There were six of us eventually.

The church and parish of Marija Pomagaj was built and established 1954-1955. I had my first communion there, my confirmation. I was an altar boy, a Boy Scout, attended Slovenska šola. We were regular attendees at Sunday Mass. My parents went to social events at the church hall most Saturday nights. There were religious organizations for women and men, and young folk. There was a weekly youth dance where many younger adults met their significant others. I remember many Sunday afternoons going to presentations and plays, many in which our mother performed. Marija Pomagaj was a very community.

It was in this environment that I encountered my first Hero. Like some that I'll tell you about, I definitely had a different impression of this person when I was a child. But now, looking back with my "historical" eye, I definitely feel that the title is deserved.

In 1959, Gospod Tone Zrnec came to Marija Pomagaj. Slovenska šola became much harder to endure, especially verouk. He was a demanding instructor, insisting on perfection. He had a temper, he could be rude and brusque. He was impatient and not above, shall we say, a physical stimulation of the brain. Definitely a person with faults, but, looking back now and seeing what he achieved and the resulting enrichment of that community, in my eyes, he's a hero, a hero unsung and much maligned despite his successes and enduring legacy.

Gospod Zrnec came from a large family and a poor background from around Velke Lašče in Dolenska. He had a passion for music and a desire to study. Because of his circumstances, thin way to pursue his passion was

to enter the priesthood. The war erupted and halted his education in Primorska. He joined the Domobranci, and as I understand it, he was fierce and fearless combatant. At the end of that conflict, he continued with his studies in Italy and attained priesthood.

Yes he was fierce and tenacious, but driven to create music. He established a children's choir and then various subgroups within that choir. Soon he had us singing in not only two part harmony, but 3 and sometimes 4 part arrangements!

He started Accordion classes. Some of his students went on to become performers in popular dance bands,.... some dropped accordion and switched to other instruments. Yes Gospod Zrnec was quite the demanding taskmaster! I do recall being on the receiving end of the odd "klofuta" because I had practiced something other than what he had assigned or played a wrong note. That school eventually merged with one led by Dr, Kasimir Fojs. Matija Lebar is a graduate cum laude of that school. But I digress.

He produced concerts several times a year, and the annual "Glasbeni Festival". That featured performances by the Otroški Zbor, Dekliški Ybor, Slovenska Šola recitations, accordion ensembles, and special guest professional performers. These concerts were the highlight for many a young aspiring performer. And it wasn't always just traditional Slovenian tunes or the classics. I recall one performance by a band I was in playing rock songs while some of the girls from the Dekliški Zbor did creative dance routines in miniskirts and white boots! Almost a scandal that was!

Gospod Zrnec produced several memorable children's musicals, that performed to capacity audiences. "Bavbavčki" and "Kresniček" come to

mind. All rousing successes that featured us 8-12 year performers and the odd adult. In these, he enlisted the capable talents of Mr. Vilko Čekuta and the Slovenian theatrical community to give these shows stage polish and direction. I believe that, during Gospod Zrnec's tenure at Manning, it was the Golden Age for culture and music in our Slovenian community.

Love him or not, Gospod Zrnec proved to be inspirational for more than a few people. The choirs and performances gave many of us a lifelong love of music and performance. There is a group of girls from the original Dekliški Zbor who, under the direction of the late Silvi Ovčjak-Kolarič, still on occasion perform together and annually celebrate his birthday.

Gospod Zrnec was also an avid photographer and his vast collections of photos are an amazing record of life around the church and especially the early years here at the Farma. He was a passionate advocate for the cause of Bishop Baraga's beatification. He shot photo essays about Baragaland, and produced a film about Baraga promoting the case for his sainthood that is in the records in Rome. Marija Babič and I did the Slovenian and English voice-over narration.

So, there you have him Gospod Tone Zrnec, impatient, rude, irascible, miserable in his later life. He had his faults, an imperfect person. Sadly mistreated by the very people he was dedicated to serving. But you can't fault his accomplishments and the legacy he created. To me, he will always be a hero.

I was a member of the "Nagelj" Dance Group for several years. There I encountered my second hero - Ciril Soršak. Again, that's not what I thought

while I was in the group Ciril was insistent, excitable, precise and demanding. Looking back and getting to know him, he achieved and contributed a lot to the social and cultural fabric of our Slovenian community. He came to Toronto as a young man in the mid 1950's and lived for a time in the house next to Marija Pomagaj. He was an involved member of the community and helped out at the church. An electrician by trade, he installed the lighting system for the stage. He participated in theatrical productions. He established a youth club and was allowed by the pastor to have social events for young men and women together in the church hall - a first. As a student in Slovenia, in Ljubljana, while studying for his trade papers, he also developed a side interest in and studied traditional Slovenian folk dances. He became quite passionate about that. That passion led to the founding of "Nagelj" in the late '50's. From its small beginnings, the group grew in numbers to feature senior and junior groups, as well as the little "Nageljčki". He led the troupe for over 40 years. They performed at Expo '67, at the CNE, at City Hall, in various tours to parts of Canada and the United States. In the '70's and '80's, Nagelj performed on several tours throughout Slovenia, as well as in more recent times. "Nageljčki" still carries on as a group. The Slovenian folkloric tradition lives on through the organization "Mladi Glas" no doubt inspired by the successes of "Nagelj"! Ciril was involved on the theatrical side of things as well. He acted in plays directed by Vilko Čekuta, and eventually played a leading role in establishing the theatrical organization SIST - Slovenska Igralska Supine Toronto _ where he's been producer, director, actor and leading administrator, along with Dr. Tone Kačnik. His inter-organizational activities with VSKO resulted in his being at a conference

in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 1990 at the time the successful battles for Slovenia's independence broke out.

Ciril has been an avid and persistent photographer at our events and has thousands of photos that document various events and happenings in our Slovenian communities over the last several decades.

Ciril Soršak....A humble man who has always helped out, he might like the spotlight, but he doesn't seek it out, a man dedicated to his passion for Slovenian folkloric dance. A man intent on photographing every item and every public event. Not a perfect human being, but given what he created and what he contributed to the cultural fabric of our community, in my eyes, he's a hero.

And then there is his wife, Milena. She grew up in Zalog, a small farming community at the time, now a suburb of Ljubljana. She was a brilliant student and excelled in school eventually specializing in the study of Slovensčina in university. She wanted to improve her English in order to advance her education and progress towards her degree. One of her uncles was a priest here in Canada, Fr. Mejač. He facilitated a "temporary" sojourn to Canada. She never returned to complete her studies. Eventually she and Ciril became "an item". They married and started family and a business simultaneously. She realized her dream of becoming a teacher by teaching at the Slovenska Šola eventually establishing classes at Brezmadežna for senior students who were utilizing Slovenian language studies for high school credits. She, along with my mother, contributed articles to various publications. She acted as editor for several books written by Gospod Zrnec. She was integrally involved with the original "Glasilo" and the original Slovenian radio hour on CHIN radio. She produced the Victoria Fund Talent

show for 10 years, an annual fundraising event to assist Slovenian families with developmentally challenged children, truly a noble cause. Now she is occupied with digitizing and organizing Ciril's vast catalogue of photographs for archival purposes. Milena is a hero in her own right.

And there was Vilko Čekuta, a man I credit with bringing some serious culture to our community at Marija Pomagaj. He began producing and directing plays in the mid '50's after the church was completed. He had studied Theatre in Slovenia but had to leave along with his opera singer wife Milena. He utilized his talents and capabilities most admirably with the many plays and presentations he staged. From comedies to dramas to the Classics, all were notable for his innovative staging and sets and the exuberant and polished performances of the actors involved. He was a very inspiring director and famous for his calm demeanour and never-ending patience. He had a way of drawing out commendable performances from the most unlikely of actors. The company performed for many years and regularly toured the Slovenian communities in Cleveland, Montreal, Hamilton and Windsor. My mother was a staple the acting core and my dad served as chauffeur for the tours.

In 1958, Jože Kastelic, a successful businessman, bought a 30 acre parcel of land and donated it to the church so Slovenians could have somewhere to go on weekends. That was the start of this beautiful place.

I remember coming here in the '60's and playing with friends while our fathers cleared trees and filled the swamp in the valley. It has since grown into what we have here today. From a ramshackle collection of tents with

roofs, to trailers with rooms attached, to cabins, to cottages, the progress has been led and driven by presidents and members who had the vision and the energy to create this little paradise.

I am only going to mention two presidents. All the presidents have been memorable, but these two stand out. There was John Flegar (sr,) in the '70's . He spearheaded the creation of the soccer field and “the original pool”, that being the 1/2 acre pond with the cement sides and floor that managed to stay legal as a pool for over 20 years. He expanded the cottage areas to include “Prekmurska Vas” and the development of the hills area above the forest. He was instrumental in the construction of Baragov Dom our current main facility for events.

And then there is our current president John Kuri who spends countless hours and days utilizing his commendable professional skills designing, planning, facilitating, and maintaining his desire to modernize and improve the infrastructure of our Farma, to ensure the continuation and safety of this special place, this community of which I am a small part.

And here , too, I find unsung heroes. In my eyes, one is John Kuri Sr., who , not coincidentally, is John's father and a professional in his own right. He is responsible for installing the many kilometres of pipe that supply water to all our facilities and the cottages, the plumbing in the new WC building and any retrofits of the filtration and pool systems. All done very efficiently and quietly. Mr. Kuri steps up for any project President John devises. On top of that he is just a super guy who will gladly help out anyone with a problem. Several years ago, he established a mini plantation of sorts to grow trees from seedlings that were then planted in various areas of the property. Mr. Kuri, a genuine nice guy, a true hero, not only for his dedication and

expertise, but his ability to deal with a demanding boss!

As previously mentioned, heroes are ordinary people. As such they aren't perfect. My next unsung hero certainly fits the bill. He can be cranky and cantankerous, he's opinionated. Heaven forbid that you ever cross him! But if you're on his good side, he'll bend over backwards to help. He's a guy who's repaired things without being asked. Being passionate about this place, he's ever vigilant and mindful of our surroundings. He's done everything from re-roofing Farma buildings, to building the additions to the main water filter building and the Hill pump house. We needed something done, he did his damndest to make it happen. His contributions to the wellbeing of our Farma community are immeasurable. For example, these picnic tables you're sitting at, he made them, probably over hundred of them. I value staying in his favour. His insight and advice has greatly benefit my roles as a member of the Maintenance team. That person is my favourite curmudgeon, the incomparable Joe Muhič. Not a perfect human being, but truly an unsung hero.

In the early 1990's, a young father with two young daughters wanted them to be able to play baseball. He was himself an avid ballplayer. So he organized a wee tournament for his daughters and all the children. It was fun and successful. And then he did it again. Today, that has grown to a full slate of tournament weekends with different age groups playing on separate weekends. There were originally 4 weekends of baseball, later 2 weekends of soccer. were initiated to make a full summer season of participatory sports for all ages. Those tournaments featured over 100 players per weekend. The sports events are meticulously organized and are a feature attraction for the

Farma. These tournament weekends, which now also include two volleyball tournaments, have been taking place for thirty years. The man behind all this..... Frank Krmelj, who turned his passion for sport into a continuing benefit for the community that has lasted over 30 years and is still going strong.

Mario Ulčar became an integral cog in this sporting venture, contributing organizational skills and leading the drive to build the sports deck and bar overlooking the playing field. He was for many years on the Committee as both member responsible for the bar operations and the sports committees. He also contributed 5 players, his children. As they grew older, they became actively involved in organizing, score keeping and doing play by play commentary. Besides still actively participating, they are busily involved in raising a team of future players!

But I don't single Mario out just for his involvement with our Farma. He is the current President of the Slovenian Canadian Historical Society.

Mario has always been known for his enthusiasm, commitment and dedication to whichever roles he's undertaken; from musician (with Veseli Študenti in the '60's and early '70's), to Scout leader, to Farma member, to Committee duties and the aforementioned sports oversight. But he is passionate about the role of the Historical Society and making it more relevant and accessible for all of Slovenian descent.

Earlier this year, he asked me if I would be interested in shooting video interviews with Slovenian seniors to capture their stories for archival purposes. Given my professional background in television, this was a natural fit of my skills and desire to contribute. Professional television

producer Sonja Obljubek, a girl with Slovenian heritage from Thunder Bay, was already on board the project. Her passion and desire to know our Slovenian histories is the heart of our little team. Together we've shot about 28 interviews. They will be edited and eventually compiled together to be readily accessible on the Canadian Slovenian Historical Society web page for all to enjoy.

Through this ongoing venture, I've met people from other parts this extended community and have been awed by their commitment and dedication to building and maintaining Slovenian roots, culture and community.

There's Jerry Ponikvar, originally from Timmins. His parents emigrated there in the 1930's, eventually owning a store there. They worked long hours to maintain their business, and often extended themselves to help out their customers, but they made the time to instill in their children a love for Slovenian language and culture and pride in their heritage. He recalls being harassed because of his name and because his parents spoke English with an accent. He wanted to be a teacher and, with guidance from a special teacher, went to university in Montreal and earned his degree. He achieved great success, eventually becoming a Superintendent for the Toronto Catholic School Board overseeing an area of west Toronto where, coincidentally, many of my generation went to school. Jerry eventually became the Head of the Hamilton Catholic School Board and upon retiring, sat on the Ontario provincial EQAO standards board for two years. Jerry was instrumental in starting the Hamilton branch of the Canadian Slovenian Historical Society, giving selflessly of his time and professional skill set. He

worked with the St. Joseph's Society to organize events and gatherings for Slovenian seniors and he dedicated himself to improving conditions and quality of life at the local Slovenian Seniors' residence. A true hero, giving back to his beloved community.

There's Stane Kranjc whose passion for history and the greater community of Slovenians across Canada, led to the founding of VSKO, the umbrella organization for many different Slovenian groups and organizations. Stane IS the founder of the Canadian Slovenian Historical Society. In his real life, Stane worked his way up the ranks of a major food company, eventually becoming the Vice President of international operations. For many years, he was involved here at this place as a member and prominent volunteer, Stane was always volunteering or organizing at events and functions and helping out his fellow Slovenians. He was involved in the independence movement for Slovenia and was elected the first representative for Slovenians in Canada to the new government of the Republic of Slovenia in the 1990's for two terms. He is a true fountain of information regarding the growth and development of our extended Slovenian community in Canada. Modest and humble, he truly deserves recognition for all his work ensuring our culture and heritage lives on.

There's Joe Slobodnik, who, besides building up a very successful business from the ground up, was named the first honorary consul for the new Slovenia and worked tirelessly to establish and maintain commercial and business ties with the newly independent Slovenian economic community. In St. Catharines, I met Frank Vrhovšek, a retired factory worker who emigrated from Slovenia in the 1960's. The Niagara region is home to quite

a few Slovenians who were attracted by the opportunity to establish farms and orchards, as well as employment in the area's then burgeoning automotive industries. It was home to a disparate group of Slovenians. There was a large core of Slovenians who had settled before WWII, some had moved down from the mining regions of Sudbury and Timmins, their families had emigrated from Europe in the 1930's, many had been born in Northern Ontario. There was another rather numerous group of families that had arrived in the years after the end of WWII. And then there were those who had arrived as economic refugees in the late '50's and '60's and '70's. There is no central church or community centre. The groups did not easily mingle, especially not with the more recent immigrants. Frank envisioned a rural retreat where the community could all get together as Slovenians for social functions. He managed to bring the different factions together and eventually established Lipa Park, a beautiful woodland park on the edge of the Niagara Escarpment. He was the President for 25 years. Lipa Park is still central to the Niagara Slovenians for functions and get togethers. As well, the facility is rented out at times to non Slovenians for weddings and other functions. Frank Vrhovšek, honest, modest and "salt of the earth", who, although a more recent immigrant, took on the mission of bringing Slovenians of all the generations in his new home together to live and grow their Slovenian heritage. A hero indeed!

And last, but not least, a truly amazing woman, Cveta Arhar. An energetic and dynamic woman, she was widowed at 48. Instead of giving up on life, she looked to do something with meaning. Realizing that she was not alone in her situation, she set up a club for Slovenian widows and widowers of all ages, organizing various activities, excursions and trips abroad that served

to immensely enhance the quality of life for a great many Slovenian seniors. Ceta Arhar, the penultimate organizer, has for the last 25 years been a tireless volunteer and fundraiser for our very own seniors' residence, Dom Lipa, improving the quality of life for Slovenian seniors and enhancing the cultural and human fabric of our Slovenian community. She too, in my mind, is an unsung hero and a shining example of the human qualities that are the core of being Slovenian.

So.. what do these heroes of mine have in common? Their contributions to the community are diverse in scope. Their efforts and achievements contribute to the betterment of the community, the preservation of culture, the advancement of the arts.

What they all have in common, the quality they all share...what they do, or did, it is all volunteer work. While enjoying and taking advantage of the benefits of life in this country, in this community, they give back: using acquired skills to improve infrastructure, transforming an interest or backgrounds in culture or the Arts into living, ongoing entities, turning ideas into realities, being compassionate and proactive to help their fellow Slovenians. Because of this, we all benefit, the community grows and stays strong. It is heroes like these, ordinary people doing extraordinary things, who guarantee the survival and success of our collective Slovenian community.

With that being said, let me wrap it up.

To paraphrase a famous quote from John F. Kennedy, a president revered by the Americans as a hero, despite documented failings as a person,

“ Ask not what your community can do for you, but what can you do for your

community”.

I will leave you with this - to all of you, especially the younger folk here, who come to this place to play sports and party, being here and enjoying the benefits of this community is a privilege, not a right. Earn that right by contributing, by helping out, by respecting and giving back to our community. Be a part of history. Don't be just a footnote, make your own history. Be a hero!

Thank you.

