



OUR STORY

NAŠA ZGODOVINA



Canadian Slovenian Historical Society ~ Vol. 12 ~ Spring 22

Encounters with the Sacred: *A Canadian-Slovenian Novel*

by Berta Milavec Byrne

When I was thirteen years old, I had a series of conversations with my grandfather that left an indelible mark on my life.

It was the summer of 1988, and my family and I were at the end of a month-long stay in Slovenia. I had been in the mountains, swam in the sea, and even explored the underground world of *Postojnska Jama*, but nothing captivated me more than the stories of my grandfather. When we were gathered as a family, he would tell jokes and was seldom serious, unless he was talking about his Catholic faith. But in the evening, he and I would sit on a wooden bench outside his front door, and we would talk late into the night. When speaking about particularly serious matters, such as World War II, he would lower his voice; when speaking about what happened to thousands of Slovenians after the war, his words came out in whispers, and what I heard in those whispers never left me.

In September of that same year, I began my last year of elementary school. The teacher assigned to my class was new to the school, so I had no idea what to expect. What followed was an education like no other! I was so inspired by this teacher that I vowed to write a book based on my experiences in Grade 8.

For years and years afterward, I struggled to keep that vow. The coming-of-age story of a 13-year

old girl was clearly to be part of the storyline, but not all of it - the answer finally came in the most unexpected way. My friend handed me a history book and said, "You have to read this." The title of the book was *Slovenia 1945: Memories of Death and Survival After World War II* by John Corsellis and Marcus Ferrar.

I had not read a history book since University (and had no intention of reading more!). I had small children, a job, and very little free time, but out of respect for my friend, I did read the book, and could not have been more grateful! There I once again encountered the stories of my grandfather and many others who had survived World War II, stories that I felt deeply called to tell anew, as part of my novel.

Encounters with the Sacred was finally published in late 2021. Set in 1945, it follows the journey of Valentin, who narrowly escapes death at the hands of the communist regime of Yugoslavia, as well as Major Paul Barre, a Canadian stationed in Austria after the war who saved the lives of thousands of Slovenians. Forty years later, 13-year-old Spela is introduced; she is growing up in Toronto as the daughter of Slovenian immigrants and is connected to the events of 1945 in remarkable and unexpected ways.

Encounters with the Sacred is available at:

<https://justinpress.ca>

CSHS Archives receives support from Library and Archives Canada

reported by Heather Gardner (Archivist)

In Spring 2021, the CSHS Archives was grateful to receive funding from the Documentary Heritage Communities Program (DHCP) managed by Library and Archives Canada. The DHCP provides financial assistance to community heritage organizations to help increase access to and awareness of the activities of local heritage groups and their archival holdings.

The funding has allowed the CSHS Archives to develop a database system to improve access to our historical collection through more efficient and accurate searches of our archival descriptions. The database was designed in accordance with Canadian archival standards

and will be available for use in the Archives' facility.

All current finding aids and file lists have been uploaded to the database. With the completion of the DHCP project in March 2022, the CSHS Archives has moved forward with a new and exciting project. Thanks to the tireless efforts of CSHS Board member, Milena Sorsak, the Archives has started to digitize and describe its historical photo collection. Access to all images held by the CSHS Archives will soon be keyword searchable through the Archives' database.

The DHCP funding has greatly improved access to the CSHS Archives' collection and has provided us with the equipment and skills to move forward with new archival description projects.

The Importance of Those Same Old Stories

Anne Urbančič

The accounts of the horrific events of the Slovenian exodus must never be forgotten. For this reason, one of the goals of the CSHS archives is to gather and preserve the stories of Slovenians who emigrated to Canada whether through the trauma of Vetrinje or not. We do this through donated collections of family records and other materials. We also record oral interviews of Canadian Slovenians to learn how our community was founded and grew.

Stories are important for all of us. But I must admit my own impatience as, in their old age, my parents began to retell over and over the same tales that we, their children, had heard growing up. As the years passed, I started to notice that the stories had become slightly different in their details. Some became embellished with new elements, others had elements subtracted. One day, listening to my brother, youngest among us, tell one of Ata's "Slovenia" anecdotes, I realized that while he was recounting a familiar event, he offered information I had never heard. Ata's stories, it seems, were told in a certain way to each child and not all the details were included for all the siblings. I surmised that this was due to Ata's forgetfulness; this happened as he aged, and as his cognitive faculties underwent the inevitable changes of his advancing years.

Just recently, however, I discovered that this was not necessarily so. I came across the studies of a team of researchers at Queen's University in Kingston working with Dr. Mary Ann McColl on a project called Ten Stories. From their findings, I learned that there is far more to hearing repetitions of the same old family anecdotes, and that retelling them is not the mark of an increasingly forgetful parent. I also learned that the way in which these stories are told has very different roles intended for the lives of each individual listener.

The Ten Stories Project found that there were about ten stories that older folks tell over and over (hence the name of the project). Surprisingly, I can confirm from my own experience, that the stories my parents told were not limitless, and in fact are about ten in number.

The Ten Stories Project research team interviewed the middle-aged caregivers of elderly parents, recording them to find not only the content of the stories recounted but also to explore what the tales might mean for the listener. They discovered, as I had with my own mother and father, that the narratives focused mostly on the elderly storytellers when they were in their teens and twenties. I thought that in my family's case this was because those were the years of

trauma for my parents: WW2, loss of their language and culture, and emigration to Canada where they had to start from scratch. While this was true for my family, it more generally corroborates the research finding that most stories the aged tell are in fact from their teenage and young adult years because these two decades represent a fundamentally formative time in the adult identity of the narrator. Since I had already noticed that the stories we heard were not told with the same details to all my siblings, I was not surprised that the Ten Stories Project also found that the accounts are actually curated, finely shaped by the elderly storyteller to suit the individual listener. The small elements change but the wider wisdom behind the stories remains. In sharing their lives with us, the elderly hope to share their larger lessons about family, hard work, education, honesty, resilience, and other life attitudes. Furthermore our parents want us to carry these lessons forward into our own lives.

These, then, according to the Ten Stories Project, are not simply the same old repeated narratives. Instead, they are valuable life lessons that connect us back to our history and guide us forward into our future. They are stories of feelings, sensations and emotions rather than of facts. Dr. McColl suggests we consider them as "a gift chosen specifically for you from a loved one who is running out of time."¹ She advises us all to listen in a new way so we might find a deeper level of relationship with the elderly, even if the stories distress us or make us uncomfortable and impatient. She suggests we try to write them down because in reviewing them later we can discover how the narrator is making sense of the life they've lived. In listening to the repetitions, we have an opportunity to validate the learned wisdom of the elderly storytellers and give them a sense that their life was valued.

¹ The interview with Dr. McColl can be found at:
<https://tenstories.ca/ten-stories-in-the-news/>

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The research of the Ten Stories Project is new and fascinating.
If you're interested in learning more, you can check their website at:
<https://tenstories.ca/>



Remembering our Protectors

by Helen Smolej-Schaeffer

A few years ago, I went to Slovenia with my mother and we visited two mass graves sites; one in Kočevje and the other in Teharje. My mother wanted to pay her respects to her brothers. Her brothers were Domobranci [Homeguards] and she could only assume that they were executed and fell into these massive pits. These sites in Kočevje in Teharje are surreal, quiet and so peaceful. I was overcome by a feeling of such sadness and gratitude. My uncles, like their fellow Domobranci, were brave young patriotic men defending and protecting their love of Slovenia.

The ill-fated future of these Domobranci happened at the end of WW II. The Domobranci were attacked by all of Tito's forces from the south and the Soviet Army was at their east. The Domobranci had no choice but to flee for their lives and seek refuge in Austria. Their mission was to walk over the Karavanke Alps, by the Ljubelj Pass into Austria.

When the Slovenian civilians learned that their only protectors against Partisan terrorism were going to Austria, they knew what they had to do. In order to save their own lives, they joined the exodus to find sanctuary in Austria.

By mid-May, almost 25,000 Slovenians settled in the Vetrinjsko polje/Vetrinje fields, around an ancient monastery near Klagenfurt in the British Occupation Zone. The Domobranci placed their trust in the hands of the British army, clearly evident as they surrendered their weapons prior to crossing the Drava River and entering the fields.

What happened next was unthinkable. Who knew that the end of May in 1945 would mean death to so many Slovenians? Forced Repatriations, of almost 11,100 Domobranci, would mean the death of their ideals and beliefs. I lost my Domobranci uncles as did

other Slovenians who lost their fathers, husbands, brothers, and friends.

The Domobranci believed that the British were resettling them to Italy. It, therefore, made perfect sense that the first group to be sent there were the Engineers, Technical Battalion, Military Police, legionnaires and 600 civilians to get the future camp/barracks ready for the others. They left on Sunday, May 27, 1945.

Then on Monday May 28, two convoys left. One group left in the morning, which included one of my uncles, and the other departed in the afternoon. As this convoy included the First Aid staff, my other uncle, who was wounded, also left. In the remaining days, convoys left daily even though word was spreading throughout the camp as to what truly was happening. Yet these brave young men still left. They must have thought: "If my Comrades have left, then so shall I." They were family, after all, brothers-in-arms.

I cannot imagine their final moments of torture, being executed and falling into those deep mass graves. I am sure that the Domobranci prayed, just like Jesus did in his final hours on earth. They were all "Žalostni do smrti" [Sad to their death].

Last year, I came across some articles regarding the excavations at Kočevje and other mass graves sites in Slovenia. Items such as rosaries and Blessed Mother Mary medallions have been recovered. It brought back the memory of my visit to the Kočevje. I could not help but wonder if any of these items had belonged to my uncles.

The Canadian Slovenian Historical Society hosted the 77th anniversary of the Slovenian Exodus on April 24, 2022. We commemorated and acknowledged Slovenians who were forced to leave the country they loved so much to save their lives and their values... and, to honour those who lost their lives, our Protectors.



*Personal Records of Smolej/Zupan 1944.
[My Uncle Jože, was only 21 when he died.
Third from left, first row.]*



*Photo: Uroš Košir.
Kočevski rog, brenzo 3 pri grobišču, Stari log, najdeni pred-
meti/Items found in Kočevski rog.*

OUR VISION and MISSION STATEMENT

VISION:

To preserve the records of Slovenian immigration, cultural heritage and continued contributions to Canada and establish the legacy as Canadian Slovenians for future generations.

MISSION:

Canadian Slovenian Historical Society will:

- ◆ archive and preserve the history of Slovenian immigration, its evolutionary heritage and contributions to Canada;
- ◆ gather, record, maintain and augment relevant collections of artifacts reflecting Slovenian cultural traditions, practices and contributions;
- ◆ establish, save and maintain a collection of publications, reports and manuscripts in digital, printed and oral format from Slovenian sources/organizations across Canada;
- ◆ promote academic and literary research of *Canadian Slovenians* in Canada;
- ◆ create/build a display setting of museum format for archives and artifacts;
- ◆ raise awareness, provide access and promote education of the workings and relevance of the CSHS, and strive for community engagement.

Report from the AGM

by Miriam Čekuta

On Saturday February 12, 2022, CSHS held its Annual General Meeting via Zoom. Along with our regular members, we were joined by guests from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast. Even though our offices at Dom Lipa were closed for the past two years due to COVID, we have remained active. We have continued with our regular monthly meetings, all be it by Zoom. We continued with interviews both oral and by video through our Povjte nam kaj program. Our collection of visuals has grown exponentially with digitalization. We have attended online archival workshops and we produced four issues of Our Story. With the assistance of our archivist, we enhanced our emergency plan and with a brand new computer improved access to the collections in our archives. Even though our gala event, remembering the 75th Anniversary of the Slovenian Exodus of May 1945, had been postponed three times, we continued collecting articles and completing our video documentary which we presented on April 24, 2022.

A detailed report of the event will be included in our next newsletter this coming summer.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- Saturday, June 25 Slovenski dan, Niagara Slovenski Park
CSHS display
- Sunday, October 16 - **Remembering May 1945** - Slovenian Exodus
Luncheon and documentary
at St. Gregory the Great - Church Hall, Hamilton

HVALA ~ THANK YOU

CSHS appreciates everyone's support.

Your generous donations assist in the preservation of Canadian Slovenian heritage.

OUR STORY is published by:
Canadian Slovenian Historical Society
Kanadsko slovensko zgodovinsko društvo
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