



OUR STORY

NAŠA ZGODOVINA



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Dear members and friends,

One year has passed since our last newsletter, Our Story, was issued. And even though so much time has expired over these twelve months, in many ways time seems to have stood still and our carefully and thoughtfully planned agenda for the year 2020 was forcibly put aside. Blame it on COVID-19!

Our biggest project that we were preparing and hosting for the spring of 2020 was a memorial for the 75th Anniversary of the exodus of Slovenians from their homes in May of 1945. We were hoping to honour in special ways all those who had made the difficult and hazardous journey over or through the Alps to Austria. We were ready to proceed as had been planned and most of the tickets for the event were sold out. Due to the lockdown, the social distancing and isolating which were called for by our government for the safety of us all, was unfortunately cancelled. Our hope at this time is to carry on with this event in the fall of this year, 2021. God willing.

Povejte nam kaj, our live oral interviews continued at a much slower pace and most had to be completed virtually or by telephone as personal contact was not permitted. Only a sprinkle of archival material was gathered and catalogued as we were not able to enter our archive rooms at Dom Lipa due to pandemic restrictions.

Over the past years we have always participated at the many various cultural events at our Slovenian parks, Slovenian halls and as well at several national events in Canada and Slovenia. Throughout the past year we did not attend or participate at these regular events where we are often called upon to attend and display our artifacts, photographs and other archival materials. Unfortunately, the pandemic cancelled all large and small group gatherings.

On a sadder note, we lost two of our founding members early in 2020. Jerry Ponikvar and France Habjan passed away from natural causes in the spring of last year. They were both pillars in the Slovenian community. We, at CSHS, will miss their guidance and support, as will the greater Slovenian community.

However, all our activities were not put idly aside and we continued to meet regularly by Zoom not only to check up on each others health or to cheer us on during this dreary time. We are continuing with our preparations and research for the 75th Anniversary event which we hope will take place later during this year. We also hope to add to our agenda following our General Annual Meeting this February.

This pandemic will eventually end and we will be able to return to our regular routines and work. We will continue to build our archival materials and we will find a way to celebrate our Slovenian and Canadian heritage.

Stay safe, stay healthy!
Ostanite zdravi,

Miriam Čekuta



During this time when many of us ponder how to fill our daylight hours, we invite you to put *'pen to paper'* and e-mail us your family/personal traditions, experiences, remembrances, and events that reflect our rich Canadian/Slovenian culture. Your contributions may then be printed in subsequent issues of Our Story. They can be written in either Slovenian or English. We welcome contributions from all age groups.

Please forward your articles to: ourstorymcek@gmail.com

Sing, Even Under Difficulty

By: Helen Smolej-Schaeffer

Recently, I reread memoirs from my parents and other witnesses describing their ordeal of May 1945. This year, 2020, marks the 75th anniversary of the Slovenian Exodus. It was truly a stressful and sad time for many Slovenians, as they fled for their lives from their homeland. They survived, relying on prayer and song which gave them a sense of comfort and solidarity during this traumatic time.

While reading, a common theme kept resonating through my mind, taking me back to my Girl Guide days: "A Girl Guide smiles and sings even under difficulty". We all do this. In stressful situations, especially in recent days, we sing. Singing alleviates stress, provides us with a sense of calm and helps us cope with difficult situations. More importantly, it provides solidarity.

The Slovenian refugees prayed and sang songs to our Blessed Mother Mary, not only while they were escaping into Austria but continued at their first chance to stop and rest in the fields of Vetrinj. During their short stay in Vetrinj, they camped under open skies and, as it was the month of May, they prayed special devotions to Mary, called Šmarnice, and sang the Litanies and other Marian hymns. They sang in prayer to Blessed Mother Mary for protection and to provide them with the strength to cope with the harrowing circumstances over which they had no control.



In the camp, a choir was set up quickly. Singing was how they coped throughout these difficult and trying times. Of course, they did not have song sheets, but none were needed. They already knew the songs and sang from their hearts.

The Slovene Home Guard soldiers, called Domobranci, were also encamped there, their songs echoing throughout the camp. When the last of the convoys of Domobranci left the camps to be "repatriated", how sad and quiet the camp must have been! The remaining refugees, knowing that they might be next to be transported, packed the church with tearful, prayerful songs to the Blessed Mary to please deliver them. On May 31, 1945, their prayers were answered. Canadian Major Paul Barre was instrumental in stopping the remaining Slovenians from being transported from Vetrinj back to Slovenia, and to their deaths. For this he was named a Slovenian hero. I am sure that the choir sang tearful songs to the Blessed Mother Mary to thank her for protecting them!

On Sunday June 24, 1945, the refugee choir performed a farewell concert of Slovenian songs before they were dispersed to various Displaced Person camps in Austria and Italy. Although they were still grieving for their lost sons, boyfriends, fiancés, husbands, fathers and friends who had been sent back to die in Slovenia, they continued to sing from their hearts. They sang with love. They knew that during this traumatic time their songs, devoted to the Blessed Mother Mary, provided them with comfort, strength and solidarity. These Slovenians of the 1945 Exodus truly exemplified the law of the Girl Guide:

"We sing, even under difficulty".

The Slovenian choir at the Trofaiach refugee camp near Leoben, Austria on the occasion of papal delegate Bishop Jagodic's visit on June 13, 1948.

First row, far right, is my uncle France Zupan, Choir Director

(Photo by Marjan Kocmur)

Spring Cleaning 2020 by Anne Urbančič

This is a strange year, with the threat of COVID-19 hanging over us all, holding us in unprecedented anxiety. The world has changed all of a sudden, and we are keeping far from each other. Our daily activities have had to adapt to new routines and norms. However, the need for spring cleaning is still the same, along with the urge to sweep out the winter and welcome new pink, yellow and white blossoms, and bright green leaves, excited songbirds and warm sunshine.

This spring, in my home the sense of cleaning out old forgotten keepsakes takes on new dimensions: with my children grown, I am now looking more closely at all the things we've kept over the years and wondering what to do with them.

One difficult example is my rock collection, a homework assignment from 1966 when I was still in elementary school and we studied the rocks and minerals of Canada. For some reason the project really excited me and by the time I was finished I had collected almost ninety different samples. My classmates glued their collections to corrugated cardboard, but I wanted something different. My father, who I believed could do anything he set his mind to, told me he would help me build a wooden keepsake box for my collection, as long as I became assistant carpenter.

May had arrived in a burst of spring sunshine and longer warm evenings. I still remember distinctly how my father and I spent hours together after dinner in his makeshift basement workshop. We measured some scrap wood. He taught me to saw, and to hammer nails, and to glue so that there was no gummy residue left on the wood. He showed me types of sandpaper and guided me as I smoothed the top, bottom and sides of the box. He helped me find hinges which we affixed at the back so that the top could open. He found a small brass lock that I could use to hold the case closed when it was not on display. We worked over several evenings



filling our house with the smell of sawdust and glue and varnish. Finally, it was done; the varnish was dry, and I could carefully glue all of my display stones, one by one, to the bottom panel. I added a guide to describe each item. How proudly I carried the collection to school.

My rock collection has moved with me from house to house. But this spring as I looked at it, remembering my father and the patience, love and goodwill with which he had worked with me to make it, I suddenly knew it was time to let it go. Clearly this collection was not trash; the case was still solid and the sample stones well glued; on the other hand, it was not a valuable or unique artefact that archives would want. My husband suggested we offer it on The Freecycle Network, an internet site with branches all across Canada where you can give away items you no longer use or acquire items that you need. No money is involved.

To my surprise a lady answered the ad almost immediately. She was a grandmother looking for a way to connect with her grandson who was always picking up various stones and rocks. She thought my long-ago project might help her spend more time with him doing something he liked and that did not involve computer games. The rock collection is now his.

It was hard to let the box go, especially because my father has passed away. I took pictures of the wooden case before it changed hands. The grandmother was thrilled with how beautifully it was made and the interesting variety of stones in the collection.

Her grandson will never know my father, nor share in the grateful memories I have of him. The boy won't know the pride I felt at being assistant carpenter, nor how well the lessons of measuring, sawing, hammering, sanding and gluing have helped me in other projects as I grew older. But he will certainly know the joy and love of having an activity that only he and his grandmother share.