

## SLOVENE IMMIGRATION TO ARGENTINA IN THE INTER-WAR PERIOD

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### THE AMERICAS: THE LAND OF HOPE

Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, while the attempts at territorial expansion provoked multiple conflicts among the imperialist powers, to which the weaker peoples of Central Europe and the Balkans fell victim, Latin America was undergoing important political transformations and achieving a major expansion of its commodity exports to the capitalist markets worldwide. That commercial expansion was quite intensive in Argentina, where the rapid development of stock raising and agriculture provided the base for a process of significant change, spurred by internal economic diversification and growth of export markets.

At that time, Argentina was a country with excellent prospects: it had an abundance of fertile agricultural land, a benign climate, and a great wealth of cattle, which had been under development since colonial times; all these factors came together to give the country a set of comparative advantages for the production of beef and grains. At the same time, seaport and railroad infrastructure was being rapidly expanded and trade was growing, all of which stimulated urban growth and a broadening of the labor market.

The most important change came at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when cold storage was incorporated into the meat production process; it was used for mutton at first, and then for beef. The refrigerated meat packing plants were located in the towns closest to the stock raising areas, where the most important rail lines converged and the seaports with the greatest storage capacity were located.<sup>1</sup>

This economic trend and the sparse population of much of the country's territory induced the governments to pursue colonization policies designed to provide workers for the development of agriculture and stock raising. The large-scale flow of immigrants into Argentina, in turn, led to the creation of institutions specialized in welcoming newcomers and dispatching them to the parts of the country where manpower was

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<sup>1</sup> Ricardo Ortiz, *Historia económica de Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Plus Ultra, 1974. The policy of "governing means populating" proclaimed by Juan Bautista Alberdi had begun to be pursued by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

most needed, according to a settlement scheme managed by labor offices which took account of the immigrants' training and interests.

When they came ashore in Buenos Aires, the new arrivals were initially housed free of charge at the Immigrants' Hotel, an institution able to accommodate 4.000 people a day. So attractive was Argentina to immigrants that, according to the 1914 census, 2.357.952 out of the country's 7.885.237 inhabitants – a full 30 per cent of the population – were foreign born.<sup>2</sup>

The first Slovenes came to Argentina in 1878, though they were recorded as of Austrian nationality. Rado Genorio reports that this was a contingent of 50 families from the outskirts of Trst / Trieste and Gorica / Gorizia, who had come at the special request of the Argentine government to settle in Formosa, where it was necessary to implant a population to balance the presence of indigenous inhabitants and the pressure of Paraguayan migrants. Each family received 100 hectares of land and whatever initial assistance it needed. However, the climate and the threat from the Indians forced most of the newcomers to resettle in Entre Rios Province. About 10 families remained at the original site, and were among the founders of the city of Formosa. One of the outstanding Slovenes who arrived in Argentina with that contingent was Angel Paulina, who became known as the "Slovene gaucho". Paulina settled in Formosa and engaged in transportation of cattle to Salta; he experienced numerous adventures in those inhospitable lands.<sup>3</sup> During the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a group of workers from Gorica / Gorizia built the first cellulose and paper plant in Buenos Aires, and several Slovene coopers established themselves in Mendoza where winemaking was already being done on a large scale.<sup>4</sup>

While the Slovenes at home suffered the political and economic consequences of the First World War, the Argentine economy looked very promising. An Agriculture Ministry report, published in 1920, made the country's attractions known to the outside world: "Come, then, all useful, hard-working, and honest men who want to achieve the well-being that is sought in vain in their homeland; come you immigrants, who in obedience to the unchallengeable laws of economics and society are being separated from the European continent, and seek new fields where you can peacefully pursue your mission of work on the land."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Tercer Censo Nacional 1914, Buenos Aires, Talleres Gráficos de L.J. Rosso & Co., 1916, pp. 395-396.

<sup>3</sup> Tine Debeljak, *Martin Fierro*, Buenos Aires, 1970, pp. 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Rado Genorio, *La inmigración yugoslava en la República Argentina*, Viena, CEISAL, 1989, pp. 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Hugo Miatella, *La Argentina. Datos para inmigrantes*, Buenos Aires, Ministerio de Agricultura de la Nación, 1920, pp. 29-30.

## SLOVENE IMMIGRATION AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The Austro-Hungarian Empire was divided into four countries – Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia – at the end of the First World War, under the Trianon, Saint Germain, and Neuilly Treaties. Yugoslavia, originally called the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, was assembled from the territories of those three nations plus Bosnia-Herzegovina, Dalmatia, and the southeastern part of the Istria Peninsula (as stipulated under the Treaty of Saint Germain), and Macedonia (under the Treaty of Neuilly). As a result, Slovenia's historical territory was divided among several countries: the central regions of Slovenia, Carniola, and Styria became part of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes; after 1920 plebiscite, Carinthia remained Austrian, and most of the coastal region (Primorska), including Trieste and Gorica / Gorizia, was annexed by Italy.

In 1920 the conflict between the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, on the one hand, and Italy, on the other, for control of the Slovene coastal regions and the Istria Peninsula, aggravated by Fiume's occupation by Gabriele D'Annunzio in 1919, was settled by the Treaty of Rapallo; the Slovene coast (Primorska) and part of the Croat coast remained definitively in Italy's hands. Rijeka / Fiume was declared a free city, while Yugoslavia gained control over Dalmatia.

Once again, the Slovenes lost their political autonomy. The part of their territory belonging to Yugoslavia was subject to Serbian predominance, and the rest was annexed to Italy. To make matters worse, the entire region was sunk in poverty due to the effects of the war and the taxation policies adopted by the Italian occupiers. These conditions set in motion the second wave of emigration, as Slovenes sought new horizons in the Americas.

Rado Genorio says the Slovene and Croat minorities in the areas under Italian control were persecuted mercilessly, and their situation was only worsened by the Fascist practices. These areas were subjected to "economic, political, and cultural pressures" by the Italian authorities. It was commonplace for the inhabitants' lands to be taken away and given to Italian citizens. This practice forced much of the population to abandon their ancestral lands, mainly in Gorica / Gorizia and Trst / Trieste, but also in the Croat part of Istria, Zadar, and the islands, all of which were "separated from their ethnic womb by an unjust borderline". According to that author, Italian statistics indicate that 10,989 people immigrated to Argentina from the "Julian region" of the Slovene area between 1926 and 1934.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Velikonja considers the statistics of the period to be unreliable, since they come from Italian and Yugoslav sources and reflect the nationalities registered in the existing documentation, which did not always coincide with the people's ethnic

<sup>6</sup> Rado Genorio, *op.cit.*, pp. 7-8. The total number of Slovene immigrants to Argentina can be estimated at approximately 20,000.

identities.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the absence of Slovene nationality identified as such makes it difficult to do a statistical study of Slovene emigration, though inferences can be drawn to describe the general characteristics of this migratory movement.

The Slovenes of the coastal region could obtain passports with little difficulty, since the Italian government wanted to foster the “denationalization” of the occupied area. In addition, the best jobs were reserved for Italians and “sympathizers of the fascist government”. These adverse political conditions, and the difficulty of surviving, drove young people to abandon their homeland, as is shown in the testimony given by a number of emigrants and cited below.<sup>8</sup>

Slovene emigrants had until that time gone mainly to the United States, in view of that country’s vigorous economic expansion, but now the would-be emigrants encountered serious obstacles raised by the U.S. immigration laws of 1921 and 1924, which imposed national origin quotas. Hence, many Slovene emigrants went to Argentina, which had not then restricted the inflow of foreigners and where work was plentiful.

In general, the Slovenes in Argentina found work as masons, quarrymen, carpenters in construction projects, and painters; some worked as craftsmen or metalworkers. Many of them found jobs in the refrigerated meat packing plants, especially those from Prekmurje.<sup>9</sup>

The largest flows of immigrants were recorded between 1923 and 1928. Thereafter the numbers began to decline because the worldwide economic crisis and the resulting mass unemployment put a stop to migratory flows. The number of Yugoslavs arriving in Argentina rose from 556 in 1922 to 2.621 the following year. It then grew to 7.098 in 1927, when Yugoslavs held fifth place among European immigrants, and reached 8.815 in 1928 (fourth place, following Spaniards, Italians, and Poles). A sharp decline began in 1929, and the annual numbers of immigrants fell to 477 in 1934 and 355 in 1939; this was a reflection of the economic crisis and the restrictions on immigration imposed by Argentina.<sup>10</sup>

## FLEEING FROM ITALIAN FASCISM

The recollections of the Slovenes who arrived in Argentina in the 1920s reveal their difficult process of integration into Argentine society. This was a movement, which involved separation from deep affective roots, as well as the dissolution of families,

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Velikonja, “Las comunidades eslovenas en el Gran Buenos Aires”, *Estudios migratorios latinoamericanos*, Buenos Aires, no. 1, 1985, pp. 49–50.

<sup>8</sup> Rado Genorio, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ministerio del Interior, Dirección General de Migraciones, *Estadísticas 1921–1945*. Due the lack of continuity in the statistics, the data for 1928 were taken from a publication by the Interior Ministry’s Sectoral Office of Human Resources, in which there are summaries of the total number of foreigners who had entered the country each year.

whose members came to see each other only after many years, and in some cases, never saw each other again. The fear of the unknown was present in each traveler's mind. Emigration involved a breaking of primary bonds and settlement in a new world from which return to their native land was a mere illusion. Hope, fear, and pain intermingled in the feelings of those who chose to make the journey. It was a difficult decision, especially because they had to make a place for themselves in an unknown and frequently hostile new environment.

Cyril Kren, born in Medana, recalls that his father went to Argentina in 1923 because of the difficulties of living under Italian domination. He left his wife and their two-year-old son Cyril at home. Once in Argentina, he encountered difficult economic conditions at first. He began to work as a day laborer in Córdoba, and then moved to Buenos Aires in search of greener pastures. Thanks to the help of an Argentine friend who was a member of the Radical Party, he got a job as an orderly in the Buenos Aires Customs House, but lost it because of the political change in 1930. Thereafter he went to work in the Anglo meat packing plant, where working conditions were inhuman; few workers could bear the drastic changes of temperature between the freezers and the boilers. Only two of a group of eight workers survived; one of these was Cyril Kren's father.<sup>11</sup>

Some individual cases provide a good illustration of the situation facing the immigrants of the late 1920s. The brothers Janez and Joze Cekada, born in Jasen (Ilirska Bistrica) came to Argentina in 1928 basically fleeing Italian oppression. In those years, Joze was in military service at Trieste, stationed at the Weapons Factory. That allowed him to organize the trip to Argentina with his brother, in search of better living conditions. Another motivation for emigration was that Janez refused to serve in the Italian army. The two brothers worked at the Swift meat packing plant in Buenos Aires the first year, and then moved to Córdoba, apparently as a result of the economic crisis.<sup>12</sup>

Rudi Gustin, born in Repen (today Repengrande / Repen in Italy) in 1911, arrived in Argentina in 1928; his brother had settled in Argentina six years earlier. Life in Slovenia had become extremely difficult as a result of Italian domination, marked by the absence of political freedom and forced closing of organizations and libraries. Economic conditions deteriorated steadily because it was necessary to be a member or sympathizer of the Fascist party to get a job. Still another obstacle to subsistence was the custom of inheritance exclusively by the oldest brother. Under such discouraging conditions – especially for a young man 17 years of age – Rudi Gustin decided to emigrate. He bought his passage with part of the 2.000 lire he had received as his dowry. The bureaucratic formalities were quickly resolved thanks to the intercession of institutions which promoted emigration and because the Italian government encouraged the departure of Slovenes. His brother's presence in Buenos Aires allowed Rudi to

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Cyril Kren in Buenos Aires on September 6, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Ivan Cekada, June 5, 2000, San Ramón de la Nueva Orán, Salta.



obtain a job right away, as a mechanic – the same craft he had learned in Slovenia. He quickly joined a socialist organization, reflecting his “left wing” political sympathies, though he never belonged to any political party.<sup>13</sup>

The parents of Silvio Paulin emigrated in the same period; they left Gorica / Gorizia for Buenos Aires in 1929. Their recollections also attest to the unbearable political and social climate in the homeland, and to the displacement of Slovenes by their Italian authority. Given the difficulty of survival and the encouraging reports they received from relatives already established in Argentina, the couple decided to go there with the intention of saving money and then returning to Primorska, where their baby Silvio, 11 months old, remained.

Initially, Silvio's father got a job at a soda factory and his mother worked as a domestic servant. Both later obtained employment as building superintendents, and shortly thereafter, his father went to work at the Molinos Río de la Plata factory, under better economic conditions. As a result, their desire to return to their homeland gradually weakened. Silvio only joined his parents in 1935, when they were already established in La Paternal, enjoying a certain degree of economic success.<sup>14</sup>

The people cited above all came from the Slovene coastal region (Primorska) under Italian authority. Their decision to emigrate was motivated by the terrible economic conditions prevailing in their homeland, the unbearable political climate, and the discrimination to which the Slovene inhabitants were subject. The Prekmurjians came from different circumstances. Their emigration was undertaken chiefly for economic reasons; they sought to emerge from the poverty, which had prevailed since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and had been worsened by the First World War.

## FROM THE DEPRESSION TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In general, once they had assured their basic subsistence the Slovenes in Argentina sent for their relatives and friends, often sending them funds with which to buy their passage since many could not pay the prices charged by unscrupulous middlemen. The latter were facilitators who expedited formalities in exchange for very high fees. Most emigrants from Prekmurje went first to Radgona and then to the ports of Trieste, Marseilles, or Hamburg, where they boarded ocean liners as third-class steerage passengers, “accompanied by solitude and fear upon their arrival in Argentina”.<sup>15</sup> The Prekmurjian Arpad Bencec recalled his voyage to Argentina in 1933 together with his parents and brother, where they would be met by fellow countrymen he did not know because they had gone when he was still a small child. Bencec said: “Our life in this

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Rudi Gustin in Buenos Aires on September 9, 1999. See: “Slovenja ‘planinski raj’ vseh Slovencev”, Rodna gruda, Ljubljana, 1996. Rudi Gustin did not recall the name of the society to which he made reference.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Silvio Paulin in Buenos Aires on September 3, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Sociedad de Socorros Mutuos Esloveno, Buenos Aires, Artes Gráficas Ronor, 1988, pp. 10–11.

country was by no means easy at first. The unknown language, the very different customs, and the unavoidable need to start again from scratch" were burdens that weighed heavily on the lives of the new arrivals.<sup>16</sup>

Though most Slovenes – and most Yugoslavs in general – came from rural backgrounds, the majority of them settled in Buenos Aires, which had become the great magnet for immigrants because it offered the broadest range of employment opportunities. The Slovenes from the coastal region tended to congregate in La Paternal and then began to spread out to some nearby neighborhoods such as Villa del Parque and Chacarita.<sup>17</sup> This concentration in certain places made it possible to remain in direct contact with fellow countrymen, using their language of origin, and to develop friendships in a hostile environment – their rejection by certain elements of the local population became increasingly clear. The immigrants from Prekmurje tended to locate in the Avellaneda area of "Gran Buenos Aires", where they found work in the local meat packing plants. About 1,500 Slovenes took up residence there; half of them had come from Prekmurje. Until a few decades ago, the members of this community maintained stronger bonds of identity than other Slovene immigrants did.<sup>18</sup>

The world crisis of 1929 put a stop to the growth of the Argentine economy and provoked a severe contraction, as a result of sharply falling exports. The heretofore-successful "outward growth" strategy appeared to have run out of steam, though over the course of the 1930s the country's economy began to reorient itself toward industrialization to serve the domestic market, at a time when the urban population represented 70% of the whole. The economy's collapse engendered a political expression in the 1930 coup d'état in which President Hipólito Yrigoyen was overthrown and a dictatorship installed in power.

The Great Depression of the 1930s forced many Slovenes to move to the interior of Argentina, where work was available in highway and railroad construction. But that required losing ties with fellow countrymen in the capital. Going back to the case of Janez and Joze Cekada, we find that they had settled in Córdoba but could not cope with the difficulties of the depression era. Joze decided to return to homeland, while Janez moved to Entre Ríos to work in the corn harvest, and then to Catamarca, Tucumán, and finally, Salta.

Ivan Cekada has informed us that his father Janez worked on the Salta-Cafayate road construction project. His inability to pay the cost of tickets forced him to make all those trips on freight trains. In 1939, he journeyed to the north of Salta, and began to work for Standard Oil at Orán in 1939, as an ironworker – a craft he had learned in homeland. There he had to cope with difficulties of every conceivable kind, aggravated by the hot climate and endemic diseases such as malaria. After marrying in 1944, he

<sup>16</sup> Arpad Bencec, "Un pedacito de nuestra patria", *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Rado Genorio, Characteristics of the development of the Slovene settlement in Buenos Aires, Toronto, Canada, American Studies Association, Canadian Association for American Studies, International Convention, 1989, pp. 1-2. The locations mentioned are all in the Federal Capital.

<sup>18</sup> Rado Genorio, *La inmigración yugoslava...*, p. 3.

decided to settle there for good and got a job in a metallurgical plant. Shortly thereafter, he moved to the "Ingenio Tabacal", which offered better working conditions, and finally, he went to work on his own in 1948, opening a metalworking shop with two co-workers in the same city of Orán.

Understandably, this kind of succession of temporary jobs in the interior of the country gave rise to a migratory life style, which prevented the establishment of close ties with other members of the Slovene community. The case of Janez Cekada is illustrative of that problem; he only settled down in one place almost 10 years after his arrival in Argentina.

Laura Misetich and Marcela C. Quinteros report that many Yugoslavs participated in the construction of the Huaytiquina Railroad, known as the "Cloud Train", or in that of the bridge over the Bermejo River. That is because the engineers who directed those projects were of the same national origin and the materials they used came from Trieste.<sup>19</sup>

At that time, it was very common to send workers to the interior on a contract basis; this meant that the government transported immigrants to places where labor was needed. The statistics referring to Yugoslavs indicate that 9.258 immigrants from that country were sent to the interior under those conditions between 1923 and 1927, out of a total of 221.709 immigrants; they represented a 4.19 per cent share of the total. Most of those 9.258 Yugoslav immigrants were distributed among Buenos Aires Province (34.72%), Córdoba (19.06%), and Santa Fe (17.26%).<sup>20</sup>

The world crisis provoked a major reduction of immigration and the adoption of new legislation to limit the entry of foreigners into Argentina. On December 16<sup>th</sup> 1930 the government ordered that, beginning the following year, Argentine consuls abroad were to increase the fees for the certificates they issued for entry into the country; that measure prevented many Europeans of modest means from going to Argentina. Given the high unemployment rate at the time, in 1933 the consuls abroad were forbidden to issue visas and disembarkation permits to immigrants of any country of origin or departure, unless they had "assured in Argentina a destination, an employment, or an occupation" which would provide for their subsistence. To obtain the necessary documents it was necessary to present an employment contract, which meant that foreigners having no previous contact with the country were effectively barred. However, direct descendents of foreigners established in Argentina would be admitted, provided their relatives in the country undertook to cover their subsistence costs.<sup>21</sup>

Under these circumstances, the number of women immigrating to Argentina rose. For one thing, the restrictions in place during the 1930s prevented men from coming into the country but under the 1934 rules "relatives of residents in the country" and

<sup>19</sup> Laura Misetich and Marcela C. Quinteros, *Los yugoslavos en la ciudad de Córdoba y su práctica asociacionista. El caso de la Sociedad Eslovena Yugoslava 1940-1955*, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Escuela de Historia, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Rado Genorio, *Characteristics of the development...*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Fernando Bidabehere, *El problema inmigratorio. Sus características en la República Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Librería y Editorial "El Ateneo", 1940, pp. 38-41.



persons "called to establish a relationship" could still be admitted.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, thousands of Slovenes had established themselves in Argentina during the previous period and they generally preferred to marry women from their hometowns.

The trends revealed by the statistics on Yugoslavs who entered Argentina during the period confirm these generalizations. Men had comprised 71% of the immigrant population in 1923, and 85% in 1927. But their share fell considerably during the years of the crisis and the legal restrictions on immigration; they represented only 46% of the immigrants entering the country in 1932, and 43% in 1934.<sup>23</sup>

Though most Slovene immigrants went to work in factories, meat packing plants, or construction projects, some engaged in other activities. One was the architect Viktor Sulcic, who arrived in Argentina in 1924 and practiced his profession, participating in the construction of a large number of important buildings in Buenos Aires, including the "Banco Hipotecario", and the renovation of the "Mercado del Abasto".<sup>24</sup>

These early Slovene immigrants included a number of people who would become leading figures in the Argentine economy. Among them were the Bencich brothers, who went into cattle ranching, and Ivo Wider, who became an executive of the Argentine Rural Society, which represented the powerful landowners of the time. Also quite prominent were the "Slovene nuns", who organized schools in Paternal and San Lorenzo, and even worked with the Toba Indians in the Chaco region. Luis Pernisek, a Salesian priest, devoted a large part of his life to serving the indigenous population in Patagonia.<sup>25</sup> And Cyril Kren, who arrived in Argentina in 1937 and to whose father we have referred above, became well known as a composer and chorus director.

The difficulties in Argentina during the 1930s were not limited to the economic sphere. Ideological persecution had also begun, and some of the Slovene immigrants were targeted. Rudi Gustin, who had settled in Buenos Aires in 1928, was imprisoned on two occasions during the military dictatorship set up in 1930. These actions were part of the regime's repressive policy toward foreigners and "leftist sympathizers". Rudi Gustin's ideals appeared to have been carried into practice when the Yugoslav Republic was inaugurated; he went there in 1948 and remained until 1957.

Silvio Paulin arrived in Argentina during those difficult depression years. He came from Gorica / Gorizia at a mere seven years of age, as mentioned above. For Silvio, the departure from his native land was a surprise; he only knew he was traveling to join his parents, whom he had not seen for six years. He did not understand his aunt's tears, nor the reason why he was grasped firmly by the hand (something that was not common) and taken to the railroad station that day, where some neighbors took charge of him for the journey. He was frightened, fearful of the unknown, and could not sleep that night at the Trieste hotel where he stayed until the day of departure. But thereafter the adventure of the ocean voyage made him forget all his fears.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> República Argentina, Dirección General de Migraciones, Estadísticas 1921-1945.

<sup>24</sup> Irene Mislej, Arhitekt Viktor Sulcic, Ljubljana, Filozofska Fakulteta, 1989.

<sup>25</sup> Tine Debeljak, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

Anguish returned when Silvio finally arrived at the port of Buenos Aires, where he could not even recognize his father because he had been only 11 months old when his father had left for Argentina. During the first few days, he cried alone in the room where he lived with his parents. The city, with its gray buildings and metal roofs, depressed him; it differed so drastically from his hometown and the green countryside, which surrounded it, where he had been able to play freely. In Buenos Aires, on the contrary, his parents did not let him play with the neighboring children in the street, expressing an ethnic discrimination very common among foreign families and especially strong among the Slovenes. Silvio Paulin quickly overcame the language barrier because his knowledge of Italian allowed him to learn Spanish easily. As a teenager, he began to work in a metallurgical factory, and two years later, he moved to another metal shop to learn the lathe operator's trade, with which he was able to found his own company years later.

The outbreak of the Second World War was another factor that led to the emigration of some Slovenes, though in small numbers. Elena Bencik went to Argentina to marry a neighbor from her hometown, Moravci (Prekmurje), whom she barely remembered because he had emigrated 10 years before. Her father advised her to accept the marriage proposal she had received from Buenos Aires, because her future in Slovenia was extremely uncertain because of the war. Under the circumstances, Elena decided to go to Argentina, where a brother was already living, along with other close relatives and neighbors. When she reached Buenos Aires Elena could not contain her tears, due both to her strong feeling of loneliness and the loss of her family ties, and to the visual impact of the city's gray skyline and the "metal roofs", which caused much the same impression in her as in Silvio Paulin. She only consoled herself on seeing her brother Carlos, but naturally, the future frightened her because she was going to marry a man she barely knew.<sup>26</sup>

### UPROOTING, INTEGRATION, AND CREATION OF SLOVENE ASSOCIATIONS

In regard to the problem of integration it is necessary to emphasize, for one thing, that Europeans had strong ethnic prejudices against the local population. In addition, the immigrants tended to favor certain values that were deeply ingrained in them, such as effort, sacrifice, and saving, and they believed that those values were absent among the local population, whom they often dismissed as "lazy". Hence, some elements of the European heritage and the enormous economic difficulties they had experienced in their places of origin had an extremely strong impact on the immigrants' way of thinking. In addition to that, they had to work very hard, either to return to their native land with a sufficient hoard of cash or to make a decent life for themselves in their new country. For the Slovenes - and especially for those from Prekmurje - integration was

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Elena Bencik in Buenos Aires on August 15, 1999.

very difficult because of the obstacles raised by the language barrier and certain features of their traditional mentality that were closely linked to their permanent struggle in defense of their identity. It was common for them to use the term "collectivity" in reference to the Slovene community in Argentina; the term connoted a feeling of belonging, which did not appear to have been weakened by distance and their insertion into Argentine society – the latter generally limited to the labor sphere of life during the early years.

Moreover, the Slovenes and other Slavs had to cope with the hostility of some groups in the population. That attitude is clearly revealed by the words of an immigration specialist, who considered the entry of "Jews, Slavs, and Lithuanians" to be undesirable because they were "nationalities somewhat alien to our soil". Statements like this clearly indicate the presence of prejudice against specific ethnic groups. Immigration policy favored people from the Nordic countries, Spaniards, and Italians, in order to maintain a certain degree of homogeneity in the population.<sup>27</sup>

The immigrants who had been living in Argentina since the 1920s were accustomed to calling on Slovenian relatives and friends to join them in Argentina, and to make the trip easier they often paid their passages and found them a first job. Through these "migratory chains", the immigrants gained a better chance to establish social relations and reduce the feeling of uprootedness to a certain extent,<sup>28</sup> especially at a time when unemployment was spreading and the native-born Argentines viewed the foreigners as competitors in the labor market.

The studies on the subject indicate that the immigrants did not easily slough off the values with which they had come; rather, they tried to conserve certain aspects of their previous life, such as their language and some traditions, through their family structure.<sup>29</sup> Many Slovene women were called by their sweethearts or husbands, or received marriage proposals, which were solemnized by a power of attorney in Slovenia. The Slovenes preferred to marry women of their own origin, for reasons of ethnic solidarity and to preserve their identity, which was under attack by the hostility of the native-born population. However, it is important to note that the departure of women in Slovenia was subjected to strict controls and restrictions beginning in the 1930s, due to many problems posed by prostitution rings, including the infamous Polish group called "Zwi Migdal" which operated in Argentina.

The first organization for Yugoslav immigrants, called the Austro-Hungarian Mutual Aid Society, had been founded in 1878 at the initiative of a merchant marine captain named Santos Lovrovich. It was initially headquartered in the center of Buenos Aires, but moved to La Boca in 1900. It was subsequently renamed the Yugoslav Mutual Aid Society. The Yugoslav Home of Dock Sud was opened in 1939.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Fernando Bidabehere, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>28</sup> Laura Missetich and Marcela C. Quinteros, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Gino Germani, *La asimilación de los inmigrantes en la Argentina y el fenómeno del regreso en la inmigración reciente*, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1964, p. 30.

<sup>30</sup> Federico Fernández Larrain, "Historia documentada de Dock Sud", in: María Teresa Pikulski and

When the Slovene and Croatian coast was annexed to Italy, many protests against the Italian occupation were voiced in Argentina. A movement sprang up, led by a group of Slovene professionals. One of the means they used to spread the word about their positions was the Dalmatian newspaper *Jadran*, published in Croat, Czech, and Slovenian, and directed by Miguel Mihánovic, the brother of Nicolás Mihánovic, a well-known and powerful Croatian shipping magnate. An uprising against fascism was encouraged in some of these newspapers.<sup>31</sup> Aleš Breclj reports the existence of other publications, such as the weekly *Slovenski list*, the newspapers *Borba* and *Delavski glas*, and the magazine *Njiva*, published by Ljudski oder in the 1930s.<sup>32</sup>

The Ljudski oder Association was formed in Buenos Aires in 1925, with its headquarters in La Paternal; it sprang from the socialist-oriented organization called *Delavsko izobraževalno društvo Ljudski oder*, founded in Trieste in 1905 to "organize and educate the oppressed working and peasant class".<sup>33</sup>

The composer Cyril Kren makes reference to the creation of a male chorus in 1925, the first of Slovenian origin to be established in Argentina. Singing was a natural predilection among the Slovenes, which encouraged them to form many other choral groups in different parts of Argentina; they provided a basis for cohesion among the immigrants. And in 1927 Rudolf Leban and Rajko Rajer of Gorica / Gorizia, both educators, organized the *Primorje Slovenian Choral Society*, which dissolved the following year. Other initiatives were the *Miramar Society* (1930), and the *Slovene Circle*, which was active until 1930; the *Slovene Workers' Society* was created in Rosario the same year. The importance they attributed to conserving the native language was clearly shown by the courses in elementary Slovene given in La Paternal and Villa Devoto, founded in 1933.<sup>34</sup>

The Slovene Mutual Aid Society of Villa Devoto was organized in 1934, and the *Slovenska Krajina* (Slovene Region) Society of Avellaneda was founded in 1940; both were initiatives of immigrants from Prekmurje. In 1930 there was an attempt to form a society to bring the Prekmurjians together, but it was ephemeral, apparently because of disputes between Catholics and Protestants. Thereafter another attempt was made, but a climate of harmony could not be achieved. Consequently, the Slovene Mutual Aid Society in Bernal was organized only in 1943, by immigrants from Prekmurje; its headquarters were built at the cost of great economic sacrifice and with some loans from members. This was basically a social organization, which held festivities and sporting events that helped cement the ties among the immigrants, in addition to providing assistance to members of the community in times of trouble.<sup>35</sup>

Oscar Félix Orquigil, *Dock Sud: un sentimiento*, Buenos Aires, Imprenta Norberto Ramirez, 1991.

<sup>31</sup> Cyril Kren, *La música entre los eslovenos de la Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 1997.

<sup>32</sup> Aleš Breclj, "Slovene ethnic press in Argentina until the Second World War", *Dve domovini Two Homelands*, 2-3, Ljubljana, 1992, pp. 180-183.

<sup>33</sup> Laura Missetich and Marcela C. Quinteros, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> Cyril Kren, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>35</sup> *Sociedad de Socorros Mutuos Esloveno*, p. 2.

A number of organizations of immigrants from the Slovene coast were in operation in 1943: Slovenski dom (Slovene Home) in La Paternal, the Slovene Mutual Aid Association of Villa Devoto, and the Triglav Slovene Association of Rosario, among others. Note that regional ties were very strong among the Slovenes; the immigrants from Prekmurje and those from the coastal region (Primorska) created separate organizations.

The detailed study by Laura Missetich and Marcela C. Quinteros allows us to reconstruct part of the history of the Slovene organizations in Córdoba. There the Yugoslav Society and Library for Mutual Aid was created in 1928, but the crisis provoked its dissolution because many of the members had to move to other parts of the country. This first society was comprised of Croats and Slovenes, which implied that the rivalries between these two populations had been overcome, but its level of activity declined in later years. The Chispa Slovene Cultural Society (Slovensko kulturno društvo Iskra) existed in 1930, and was renamed Chispa Workers' Cultural Society (Delavsko kulturno društvo Iskra) in 1934; under that name it became a subsidiary of the Ljudski oder Association of Buenos Aires. The Yugoslav Society and Library for Mutual Aid and the Chispa Workers' Cultural Society merged in 1940, to form the "La Unión" Slovene Workers' Mutual Aid Society (Edinost). These organizations reflected a pro-socialist orientation, and provided assistance to community members in the fields of health care and life insurance. In addition, they sponsored cultural and social ties.<sup>36</sup>

In response to the difficulties of the first stage of integration into Argentine society, stemming from the environmental and cultural differences, it was of the utmost importance for the members of the Slovene "collectivity" to have these channels for maintaining friendship and solidarity, in the form of cultural and mutual aid societies in many cities of the country, but mainly in Buenos Aires. They made it possible to conserve a certain unity and cohesion among the residents of Slovene origin, establish social relations within the community, and thereby preserve some aspects of their age-old cultural identity.

<sup>36</sup> Laura Missetich and Marcela C. Quinteros, *op. cit.*, p. 61.



## POVZETEK

### SLOVENSKA EMIGRACIJA V ARGENTINI MED OBEMA SVETOVNIMA VOJNAMA

Catalina Banko, Pablo Mouzakis

*Argentina je ena od priseljskih držav, ki je sprejela več milijonov migrantov iz Evrope. Od konca 19. stoletja naprej je bila zaradi rodovitne zemlje, primerne za pridelavo žit in vzrejo govedu za izvoz, ekonomsko obetavna država. Zaradi pomanjkanja delovne sile in z namenom poselitve velikih praznih območij v notranjosti dežele, je več zaporednih argentinskih vlad spodbujalo priseljevanje. Medtem ko je bilo argentinsko gospodarstvo v vzponu, je slovensko prebivalstvo trpelo politične in gospodarske posledice prve svetovne vojne. Iskanje boljšega življenja je tako bilo posledica političnih pritiskov, hude revščine in socialne marginalnosti. Največji dotok priseljencev v Argentino je zabeležen v letih med 1923 in 1928. Po tem je število priseljencev upadalo zaradi svetovne gospodarske krize in posledične množične brezposelnosti, ki je zaustavila migracijske tokove.*

*Proces integracije v argentinsko družbo je bil zelo težak. Neznani jezik, drugačni običaji in neizogibna potreba po ponovnem začetku iz nič, so bila bremena, ki so z veliko težo pritiskala na življenja prišlekov. Čeprav je večina Slovencev izvirala iz ruralnih okolij, so se največ naseljevali v Buenos Airesu, ki je bil, zaradi velikih možnosti za zaposlitev, pravi magnet za nove priseljence.*

*Da so v prvi fazi integracije v argentinsko družbo laže premagali težave, ki so izhajale iz okoljskih in družbenih razlik, je bilo izjemnega pomena, da so imeli člani skupnosti možnost ohranjanja medsebojnega prijateljstva in solidarnosti - v obliki kulturnih društev in društev vzajemne pomoči. V bistvu so bile to družabne organizacije, ki so prirejale slavja in športne dogodke, kar vse je pripomoglo k utrjevanju vezi med izseljenci, poleg tega pa so nudile članom skupnosti pomoč, kadar so jo potrebovali. Društva so omogočila ohranitev enotnosti in kohezije med prebivalci slovenskega izvora, vzpostavitev socialnih odnosov znotraj skupnosti in s tem ohranitev nekaterih vidikov njihove stare kulturne identitete.*

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