

## LOUIS ADAMIC AND VATRO GRILL: A PARTNERSHIP OF EQUALS?

*Mirko Jurak*

In 1956 Anton Melik, Professor of Geography at the University of Ljubljana, published a travelogue *Amerika in ameriška Slovenija* (America and American Slovenia). The author points out in his "notes" the pride of American people regarding their achievements, social and racial antagonisms which exist in the United States, and the fate of Slovene immigrants who must have found it difficult "to establish for themselves an equal position with other immigrants and old settlers due to their insufficient education and lack of knowledge of English".<sup>1</sup> A large part of Melik's book is devoted to his encounters with American Slovenes. Among them he also mentions his conversations with Vatro Grill, who knew Louis Adamic well and was a close friend of his.<sup>2</sup> Melik says that Adamic and Grill were members of the same generation, they even attended the same secondary school in Ljubljana and they left for America in the same year, in 1913. When they met they discovered that they had the same or very similar views upon problems Slovene immigrants had in America. Melik also suggests that when a book is going to be written about Louis Adamic, Grill is the right person to contribute to it.

These suggestions and particularly the admiration expressed by Vatroslav Grill in his autobiography *Med dvema svetovoma* (Between Two Worlds, 1979)<sup>3</sup> for Louis Adamic to whom he dedicated his book, arouse in me questions about the nature of this relationship, more precisely, whether this relationship was mainly a one-sided one, or whether Adamic found in Grill not only an ardent supporter but also an equal intellectual partner, a man whose opinion he took into consideration or which even influenced his life and work. In order to solve this puzzle I have not just read very closely Grill's autobiography but I have also researched Adamic's correspondence with Vatroslav Grill and other material on Grill kept by the Manuscript Department of the Slovene National and University Library (NUK) in Ljubljana.<sup>4</sup> By now a number of books and many articles have been written on Louis Adamic and therefore it is not necessary for me to repeat the story of his life,

---

<sup>1</sup> Anton Melik, *Amerika in ameriška Slovenija*. (*America and American Slovenia*.) Ljubljana: DZS, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> See n. 1, 233-234.

<sup>3</sup> Vatroslav Grill, *Med dvema svetovoma*. (Between Two Worlds.) Ljubljana: MK, 1979. The abbreviation *MDS* is used from now on.

<sup>4</sup> I wish to thank Mr. Mihael Glavan and Ms. Rozina Švent from the National and University Library in Ljubljana for their help.

or present an analysis of his literary achievements. However, Vatroslav Grill is much less known not only in Slovenia but also in America and some facts from his life and work may help us to illuminate his personality more clearly.

Vatro (Vatroslav) Grill was born as Ignacij Gril on February 1, 1899, in the village Soteska near Moravče, Slovenia. He attended the elementary school at Moravče and then finished three years of the secondary school in Ljubljana. In August 1913 he left with his mother and sister for Cleveland, where his father had been since March of the same year. The family went to America because they were afraid of the approaching First World War, and of poverty, which had already begun to affect life at home. At first Grill was not sure what he wished to do and what he could actually become in the States, so he learnt type-setting and got a job with one of the Slovene newspapers published in Cleveland. In 1918 he got a regular job with a Slovene newspaper *Enakopravnost* (*Slovenian Equality Daily*), but already at the end of 1919 he became a journalist and the sole editor of *Enakopravnost*, which he edited between 1919-1936, 1943-1948 and finally from 1950 until April 6, 1957, when *Enakopravnost* merged with another Slovene newspaper, *Prosveta* (*The Enlightenment*). This newspaper has been published since 1917 by one of the two largest Slovene societies in the United States, by the Slovenska narodna in podporna jednota (The Slovene National Benefit Society). This society still exists and it still publishes *Prosveta*, but it is mainly in English now.

Grill soon realized that his achievements in life would be higher if he finished the secondary school and obtained the university education. He went to night classes at Cleveland Preparatory School and he simultaneously attended the Cleveland Law School. He got his Bachelor of Law degree in May 1925 and a month later he also passed his Bar exams in Columbus, Ohio. During the following decades he held various public posts. Among others, he became Assistant Public Prosecutor in Cleveland in 1942, and in 1959 he became Assistant Attorney General for the State of Ohio. Grill retired from this position in 1963. After the Second World War he visited Slovenia several times and gathered here the material for his autobiography and wrote the first draft of his *Med dvema svetovoma*. He died on March 21, 1976 in Santa Clara, California, three years before the publication of his bulky manuscript, which was prepared for publication by Professor Jerneja Petrič.

Although Grill's professional position was relatively high in the ranks of Ohio administration, he often mentions in his autobiography that he always freely expressed his views on political and social issues. But he really became known among members of the Slovene emigrant community by his journalistic and cultural activities. He was an actor in the "Ivan Cankar" theatre society and he even directed some plays performed by this group. He was also a member of the "Zarja" singing society, and a member of various benefit societies, the Director of the Slovenski narodni dom (Slovene National Home) in Cleveland, the President of the Slovenska svobodomiselna podporna zveza (Slovenian Freethinking Benefit Society, 1928-1936). In the 1930s and 1940s Grill also translated a number of Adamic's articles, which had been previously published in various reviews (e.g. in *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *Harper's*, *Time* and *Tide* etc.), from English into Slovene. Although he also tried his hand at translating literature (Dickens, Kipling)

and also wrote some poems for *Prosveta* and *Rodna gruda*, as late as in the 1960s, he must have realized quite early in his life that his real forte was journalism and not creative writing.

On Dec. 24, 1921, Ivan Cankar's short story "Simple Martin"<sup>5</sup> appeared in the American weekly *The Living Age*, published in Boston. Vatro Grill noticed the appearance of this and several other short stories, which were translated from Slovene literature, and he began to wonder who the translator might be, because his name did not appear together with the translation. He reported about this in *Enakopravnost*, but the question remained unanswered for several years.<sup>6</sup> Then, in July 1928, Louis Adamic published in the avantgarde monthly, *The American Mercury*, his essay "The Bohunks". It was written in a slightly satirical tone and Adamic dealt in it mainly with weaknesses – but also with some positive sides – of the Slovenes, both at home and in America. One of the main faults that he mentions is the servility of the Slovenes towards people who have an authority, be it secular or religious, and their tendency to accept the worst side of American materialism, their becoming insensitive for moral values, which they "brought with them" to America. But on the other hand Adamic stresses that without their contribution America would not be what it is. Adamic also attacks in this essay the yellow press, including the immigrant papers.<sup>7</sup> The response among Slovene reviewers was mainly negative (as e.g. in the Catholic oriented *Ameriška domovina* – *American home*), or the newspapers only mentioned the essay without giving any opinion or even kept quiet about it (e.g. *Prosveta* and *Proletarec* – *The Proletarian* in Chicago, *Glas naroda* – *Voice of the People* in New York, respectively).<sup>8</sup> Vatro Grill praised the article in his editorial in *Enakopravnost* (August 15, 1928) and he expressed in it his firm belief that this was not the last what one could hear about Adamic. He also believed that the Slovenes in America did not pay enough attention to their intellectual and cultural needs and that Adamic's points were true and relevant.

History has proved Grill was right, for Adamic published in the 1930s a number of books which placed him among the best, most eloquent and also most critical American writers of the period. Several of his most important works were actually published in this decade: *Dynamite: the Story of Class Violence* (1931), *Laughing in the Jungle* (1932), *The Native's Return* (1934), *Grandsons* (1935), *Cradle of Life* (1936), *The House in Antigua* (1936), and *My America* (1938). This was, no doubt, Adamic's most prolific period, and it was also the time when he and Vatroslav Grill had very frequent personal contacts.

Louis Adamic and Vatro Grill met in Cleveland at the end of December 1933, when Adamic and his wife Stella stayed there for a few days. Grill introduced Adamic to a number of people, who were active in social, political and cultural life of the Slovene community in Cleveland, among others to Anton Terbovec, the editor of *Nova doba* – *New Era*, to the editor of *Cleveland Press*

---

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Cankar's story is included in his *Izbrana dela* (Selected Works), published by CZ in Ljubljana in 1955 as Bebec Martin one of the stories in 1. Cankar's collection *Podobe iz sanj* (Images from Dreams).

<sup>6</sup> MDS, 178-180.

<sup>7</sup> MDS, 546-560 (translation by V. Grill).

<sup>8</sup> MDS, 179

Frederick Sterbentz, to Frank J. Lausche, who soon became the mayor of Cleveland and who was later on five times the governor of the state of Ohio and for twelve years a member of the senate, and to many others. The visit was preceded by a brief correspondence between Adamic and Grill, which is rather important as regards their relationship. In December 1933 Adamic sent Grill a set of galley-proofs of his new book *The Native's Return* asking him to read the book and tell him what he thinks of it.<sup>9</sup> Let me say right away that Adamic continued with this practice during the following years too. Adamic let Grill know about his literary creativity, his plans for future work and responses he got from various other people. Thus, e.g., Adamic very enthusiastically wrote to Grill about the progress he made with his novel *Grandsons*<sup>10</sup> and a year later with the *Cradle of Life*.<sup>11</sup> Adamic must have been happy when Grill wrote with such high praise about his novels in *Enakopravnost*, as was the case with *The Native's Return*, which helped increase Adamic's popularity among the Slovene emigrants.<sup>12</sup> There can be no doubt that Adamic found in Grill a judicious, competent reviewer, whom he trusted, and who was very well acquainted with the general opinion of Slovene emigrants about contemporary issues not only in Cleveland, but also elsewhere in America.

Adamic believed that *The Native's Return* would be "of considerable importance to the Yugoslavs in this country and to Yugoslavia."<sup>13</sup> It seems that Adamic was himself surprised how positive the response was. He wrote to Grill that the book was "a big hit .. it became a best-seller in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Boston in less than a week after publication, which seldom happens unless one is a big shot like Sinclair Lewis."<sup>14</sup> The book even became a part of the regular university syllabus at some well-known schools, as e.g. at Columbia University, Cornell University, Smith College etc. However, the politicians in Belgrade must have been furious about Adamic's picture of political and social situation in Yugoslavia. Adamic learnt about some of these views and so he turned to Grill for help. He writes to him:

Dear Vatro: When you have a chance, I suggest that you write something to this effect – that you understand that the Yugoslav consul-general in New York, Mr. Jankovich, stated in a private conversation that "The Native's Return" was a fine book, just what we needed in this country; only he was sorry I dealt with politics in Yugoslavia. Mind you, he did not say I did not tell the truth. He said he wished he had a chance to talk to me before I published the book so that he could have advised me. Don't say where you received this

---

<sup>9</sup> L. Adamic to V Grill, Dec: 11, 1933.

<sup>10</sup> L. Adamic to V. Grill, Od. 29, 1934.

<sup>11</sup> L. Adamic to V. Grill, July 2, 1936.

<sup>12</sup> V. Grill, "Ameriška kritika pozdravlja *The Native's Return*." *Enakopravnost*, Feb. 5, 1934

<sup>13</sup> L. Adamic to v. Grill, Dec. 11, 1933.

<sup>14</sup> L. Adamic to V. Grill, April 19, n.y. (1934).

report from. Jankovich said the above to Ivan Mladineo, but don't use Mladineo's name either.<sup>15</sup>

Adamic complains in the same letter that the "klerikalci", i.e. people holding the extreme right-wing, clerical political views, wished to make Adamic even a supporter of Mussolini, what enraged him a lot.

Due to Adamic's frankness in expressing his political ideas and due to his independence from political parties, he was not liked either by the political right or the political left. The right would accuse him to have revolutionary political ideas, and the left would complain when he criticised their co-operation with the tyrannical government in Belgrade. In one of his letters to Grill Adamic mentions how it came to a crisis between him and Frank Zaitz, the editor of the newspaper *Proletarec* (The *Proletarian*), when at a meeting in Milwaukee Adamic expressed his opinion that many social-democrats in Yugoslavia "had jobs with the dictatorial government and were thus co-operating with the dictatorship. Even Molek took me to task for this, later"... and he adds further on, "in Yugoslavia, there is only one opposition group worth anything: and that's the underground Communist Party".<sup>16</sup> Although Grill never expressed any admiration for Communism, he probably accepted such views as topics about which he and Adamic had somewhat different positions. How keen Adamic was to inform Grill about his political experiences – at least in the 1930s – can be seen from another letter he sent to Grill on the very same day, i.e. on April 15, 1939, when he met in Chicago Dr. Edvard Benes. He was a former Czechoslovak Minister for Foreign Affairs (1918–1935), President of the Czechoslovak Republic (1935–1938) and during 1938–1945 the Prime Minister of the Czechoslovak Republic in exile, in London.

Louis Adamic was very much impressed by what Dr. Benes had told him in confidence during their meeting in Chicago. Adamic specifically points out in his letter to Grill Benes's persuasion that "... we must work for a free Europe, for the small countries cannot exist in a dictatorial Europe. He foresees a federated Europe, or a United States of Europe. But Europe must go through another war. That's the hell of it. The economic system in this future federated Europe, he said, will be state capitalism." And further on, Adamic reports, that Benes would like these views to be spread, but without mentioning the source, that is his name. Another important point Benes made, was "... to organize. Form communities. Yugoslavs, he said, are in the same boat as the Czechs etc."<sup>17</sup>

Adamic also asked Grill to inform people like Terbovec, Molek, Sabec "to start gradual propaganda for this idea."<sup>18</sup>

The tone and the style of Adamic's writing make it clear that he expected Grill's support and also indicate that he completely trusted Grill. The latter was in a good position as an editor who knew people in Slovene emigrants' journalism, and could also predict their reactions. Besides, Grill was known among leaders of various political parties and societies and therefore his help for Adamic was

---

<sup>15</sup> L. Adamic to V. Grill, May 5, 1934.

<sup>16</sup> L. Adamic to v. Grill, Nov. 20, 1934.

<sup>17</sup> L. Adamic to V Grill, April 15, 1939.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

definitely not negligible. They both agreed on many important points, as e.g. in their belief that in the United States religion was a personal matter and that the clergy should not be involved in politics; they both believed that free thinking was the essence of democracy; they both disapproved of crude, materialistic, extreme liberal capitalism, however, they did not think that what was then known as its counterpart, either socialism or communism, could be accepted as a solution of class antagonisms in America. Further on, they had very similar views on the importance of the emigrant's awareness of his roots, even more, they believed that emigrants should acknowledge their roots and make the best out of them. They were both unhappy because the Slovenes in America did not create a compact ethnic body not by force, but by their own free will, and they disapproved of their division into the Catholics and the liberals and socialists. Even though this cleft seemed to have diminished when the Second World War started it appeared again already during the last years of the War and the Slovene emigrant population in America has been divided again as regards politics after the War, too. Maybe they were both too optimistic in their views upon ethnic questions, politics and religion, because the solution – at least among the Slovenes – has not been found yet.

Let me return briefly to one of Grill's most known articles in which he expressed some of the views briefly indicated above. Already in 1936 he published an editorial entitled "Ali je slovenstvo v Ameriki borbe vredno? (Is Slovenhood in America worth fighting for?)"<sup>19</sup> Grill's starting point is that it is natural for an emigrant to be torn between two countries. However, he suggests, one should first of all accept one's natural ethnicity and only then can one contribute to the adopted land and its values. People who do not see anything good in their origin, are only likely to become servile ministers in their new homeland. Grill attacks in this article "false prophets", among them also emigrant political leaders – without naming them individually – and indirectly also each emigrant, who has forgotten the value of Primož Trubar, France Prešeren and Ivan Cankar and their contribution to Slovene ethnic heritage. From among Slovene artists in America Grill mentions only two: Louis Adamic and a painter Gregorij Perušek. His final question is: what are we, each one of us, and the Slovene emigrant community as a whole, going to be like in twenty, thirty years time? How do we bring up our children, looking only after their personal good, or as self-aware people who are proud of their ancestors?

Grill was, as he himself admits, pleased when Adamic praised the article and suggested to Grill that the article "should be sent to the old community – to Juš Kozak, to Oton Zupančič, and people like that."<sup>20</sup> In his autobiography Grill says that he did not send the article to anybody so that people might not think that he was being conceited.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that more than thirty years later he found an abridged version of his article published by father Kazimir Zakrajšek in his publication of Raphael's Society, but without acknowledging Grill's authorship.

Louis Adamic and Vatro Grill corresponded regularly in the 1930s, and Adamic frankly expressed in his letters to Grill views he held on various Slovene

---

<sup>19</sup> V. Grill, "Ali je slovenstvo v Ameriki borbe vredno?" *Enakopravnost*, April 9, 1936.

<sup>20</sup> L. Adamic to V. Grill, Oct 31, 1936.

<sup>21</sup> *MDS*, 203.

Americans, as e.g. Frank Lausche, Ivan Zorman, Janko N. Rogelj, Vincent Cainkar and many others, who played an important role in the Slovene political and cultural life. Grill states though that in the 1940s their contacts were "generally more indirect than direct."<sup>22</sup> They met at various conferences of organizations supporting the struggle of Slovene and Yugoslav peoples (SANS, ZOJSA) for liberation in Yugoslavia. Adamic was very much involved in these efforts, he became definitely more interested in what he was saying and less in how he was saying it, although he undoubtedly also tried to keep the literary standards he had achieved in his earlier works. When Adamic's last work *The Eagle and the Roots* posthumously appeared in 1952, Grill expressed in his review his belief that in this work one can find "all well known virtues of a psychologically acute observer, who looks at his surroundings primarily spiritually and only then with his eyes, the virtues of a born narrator, whose joy and satisfaction is in his use of the word as a vessel of beauty and truth. As a literary work *The Eagle and the Roots* stands side by side his other best works".<sup>23</sup> Twenty-two years later, in 1974, when Vatro Grill was interviewed on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, he said, among others: "It is obvious that for us, American Slovenes, Adamic was not so much important as a writer but as a phenomenon."<sup>24</sup> Grill did not explain what he meant with his use of the term "phenomenon", although one may conclude that he wished briefly to define with this concept Adamic's achievements in cultural and political sphere; however, this statement also indirectly recognizes the fact that Adamic has become less interested in pure fiction and that he was by now a "social revolutionary", "sceptical about defined philosophies, social and others", "occasionally totally overwhelmed by an idea, which could be called fantastic", as V. Grill characterized him in his autobiography, in the 1970s.<sup>25</sup> Even Rev. Jurij M. Trunk (1870–1973), a journalist and the author of one of the earliest books written by a Slovene on America (*Amerika in Amerikanci* /America and the Americans/ Celovec, 1912) expressed in his letter to L. Adamic in 1943 his belief that Adamic's views upon the situation in Yugoslavia seemed to him "true, right and correct" and that Adamic played with his "extremely brilliant gift to write, to observe, to express, to characterize and to put before the broader public an extraordinary role".<sup>26</sup> This opinion may help us to understand the popularity Adamic had in America, even though some of his opponents denied him every merit. Although Vatroslav Grill can be counted among those intellectuals who admired Adamic, but he definitely was not such a charismatic personality; however, I hope that I have shown that Adamic found in Grill a trustworthy, intelligent and reliable friend, who, as we have seen, helped Adamic in many ways. Grill summarizes their relationship in the following statement: "As an American I also wished that we, the Slovenes, would join America in a creative and meaningful way, but on the other hand, I wished, as a Slovene, for the Slovenes to preserve our identity to remain true to ourselves until the very end."<sup>27</sup> Although –

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 222. (*Enakopravnost*, June 27, 1952.)

<sup>24</sup> Bogdan Pogačnik, "75 let Vatra Grilla", *Delo*, Feb. 11, 1974.

<sup>25</sup> *MDS*. 215.

<sup>26</sup> Geo. M. Trunk (-Jurij M. Trunk) to L. Adamic, April 11, 1943.

as has been shown above – they had a lot in common the above mentioned view might be the platform of their mutual understanding and co-operation. Therefore, I believe, the central question which I raised at the beginning of this paper can easily be answered, namely, that their relationship was, generally speaking, a partnership of equals.

*University of Ljubljana*

---

<sup>27</sup> *MDS*, 223.