

## SLOVENE POETRY IN THE U.S.A.: THE CASE OF IVAN ZORMAN

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Ivan Zorman was both a musician and a poet, born in 1889 in Šmarje near Grosuplje and died in 1957 in Cleveland (Ohio). In 1893 his family emigrated to the United States of America, first to Ely, Calumet, Cleveland and then to some other American towns. After a brief return to Slovenia in 1898/9, where Zorman attended elementary school in Velesovo near Kranj, they finally settled down in 1904 in Cleveland. In 1907 Zorman took up the study of modern languages (English, French and Italian), history and music at Western Reserve University and graduated only in music in 1912. For a number of years, during 1908 and 1956, he was chief organist and choir leader (like his father) at the parish church of Sv. Lovrenc in Newburgh near Cleveland. During 1920 and 1925 he was professional director of the "Zorman Philharmonic". Not only was he known as a musician, he was very much present in the public life of the Slovene community living in Cleveland, as the enthusiastic teacher of Slovene literature in the Slovene school of the "Slovenski narodni dom", as a poet, translator and public speaker.

Although it has been claimed that Ivan Zorman is somehow "forgotten" as a poet, this is perhaps not entirely the case, taking into account the relatively high number of extant studies and entries written about him and his work. However, his work as a poet and translator has not been analyzed in great depth nor has it been properly contextualized within Slovene literary history. From among the studies of his work should especially be mentioned Janez Stanonik's detailed entry on Zorman in *The Slovene Biographical Dictionary*,<sup>1</sup> Jože Bajec's article published in *Slovenski izseljenski koledar*, Jerneja Petrič's entry in her anthology *Naši na tujih tleh*,<sup>2</sup> Edi Gobec's introduction to his anthology of Zorman's poems *Slovenski ameriški slavček Ivan Zorman* celebrating the hundredth anniversary of his birth, and, most recently, Rozina Švent's article on his books and manuscripts available in The Slovene National Library.<sup>3</sup> Also, among the most recent reprints of Zorman's poems is his frequently quoted poem "Izseljenec" (from his collection *Iz novega sveta*), published in *Misli* (1993) and in *Slovenski izseljenski koledar* (1997).

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1 Janez Stanonik, "Ivan Zorman", *SBL*, XIV. Ljubljana: SAZU, 1986: 855-56.

2 Jerneja Petrič, "Ivan Zorman", *Naši na tujih tleh*. Ljubljana: CZ, 1982: 443-46.

3 Rozina Švent, "Ivan Zorman", *Slovenski izseljenski koledar* '98. Ljubljana: SIM, 1997: 127-33.

A number of short reviews have been written about Zorman's poetry over the years by all the major cultural exponents of Slovenes living in America, and some in Slovenia,<sup>4</sup> most of them favourable, although "they were often intended to be encouraging and positive, but taking into account the circumstances in which the sensitive poet and composer worked, this seems only right and human".<sup>5</sup> Aleš Debeljak, however, wrote in 1925 somewhat critically about his verse collection *Lirični spevi* (1925) that it is "a modest train from which you can see only a wee bit of the not very big Slovene homeland" and that "the search of this book is not very deep".<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Debeljak liked the poetic images taken from nature and Zorman's smooth-flowing verse rhythm. Zorman published his poems in a number of magazines in America and Slovenia alike, and privately in Cleveland five collections of poems: *Poezije* (1919) as the very first Slovene verse collection published in the United States, *Pesmi* (1922), *Lirični spevi* (1925), *Pota Ljubezni* (1931), *Iz novega sveta* (1938) and a bilingual book of English translations from Slovene poetry *Slovene (Jugoslav) Poetry* (1928), which served Janko Lavrin (1887-1986) as the basis for some of his own verse translations from Slovene into English. Ivan Zorman may not be the very best Slovene poet ever to have written abroad, although he belongs among the first Slovene Expressionist poets, but due to the great variety, formal simplicity and especially the great popularity of his poems among the Slovenes living in America, many of which have been put to music, he can perhaps be said to belong to the very peak of Slovene literature produced in America in the first half of the twentieth century.

Zorman's first translations of Slovene poets into English were published for the first time in his collection of poems *Pesmi* (1922). He translated Prešeren, Jenko, Gregorčič, Levstik, Župančič ("Duma"), Funtek, Medved and Sardenko. A few years later, in 1928, he published a separate bilingual volume of translations into English along with their Slovene originals titled *Slovene (Jugoslav) Poetry*.<sup>7</sup> In the Preface, where he thanks his friend Dr. F. J. Kern for helpful suggestions, Zorman first states that he has not attempted to produce a fully representative anthology, for it could scarcely be the work of a single translator. The objective of the book was "only in the hope of bringing our younger Slovenes and other students of Slav literature closer to the source" that these translations have been prepared from (v). The important thing, he writes, is that he intentionally left untranslated most of the Slovene feminine rhymes and, in a few instances, the masculine rhymes, "in an effort to remain closer to the original" (ibid.). He also tried to preserve the original rhythm and meter. In the Introduction Zorman limits himself to a few general observations about Slovenia and poets translated in the book, although "it would be interesting to delve into Slovene history: the position of the Slovenes in the old Austro-Hungarian monarchy of which they were a part until the close of the First World War; their labors and struggles for a place among

<sup>4</sup> Edi Gobec, *Slovenski ameriški slavček Ivan Zorman*. Celovec, Dunaj: Mohorjeva založba, 1991: 22-6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Aleš Debeljak, "Ivan Zorman, Lirični spevi", *Ljubljanski zvon* (1925): 558.

<sup>7</sup> Ivan Zorman, *Slovene (Jugoslav) Poetry*. Cleveland: privately published, 1928. All further references in the text will be to this edition.

the free and enlightened peoples of the world; the various stages in their literary development; their present greater opportunities in independent Yugoslavia, and so on" (ibid.). He maintains that given its small size, Slovenia has produced a remarkably large number of gifted men, in literature, music, painting, sculpture and science. In describing the Slovene landscape "of unsurpassed beauty" Zorman, being primarily a musician, stresses the fact that just because of this it is "a country rich in song", for "the principal source of Slovene poetry was the folk song" (x).

Zorman's Introduction to the anthology is from a scholarly point of view exceptionally well written and the same is true as regards the themes and ideas which are very contemporary and not at all dated. He interestingly defines as the chief characteristics of Slovene poetry "the typically Slav dreamy cadences and elegiac moods, tenderness, intensity, directness, and singing quality" (xi). It is thus no coincidence, as he himself notes in the Introduction, that more than half of the poems he chose for translation have been actually set to music. He wanted to preserve the original rhymes at all cost, which, of course, sometimes makes the rhyme scheme somewhat forced and artificial, though not too often. As in his own poems, many of which were also set to music by himself or other composers, he was fond of simple, formally consistent lines of verse, primarily quatrains with alternating male and female rhymes without any caesura.

As regards the choice of authors for translation, Zorman seems to have been fascinated by those whose work was characterized by the strong nationally aware feelings. In his brief sketches of the poets translated he makes clear some of his prime concerns in making his selection. First he writes that Prešeren "stepped before the Slovene people unheralded, with scarcely a precursor to prepare the way in poetry" (xi). He goes on to say that although he uses known forms (e.g. the sonnet) and he has learned a lot from other classic European poets, his "subject-matter is altogether original". He says that despite the fact Prešeren's work ranges from the simple lyric to the "grandiose epic", all of his poems are characterized by a distinct Slovene national individuality. In referring to Fran Levstik, he stresses his philological studies and critical essays as "invaluable contributions to the Slovene language and literature" (xiii). The poem "Two Gulls", which Zorman masterfully rendered into English, is described as the first Slovene poem to depict the poet's mood, although it is not quite clear whether he meant it to turn out Romantic or Impressionistic. To Zorman, many of Simon Jenko's poems reflect the spirit of the Slovene folk song and "some of them show Heine's influence" (xiii). He also finds a deep melancholy and an ardent love that pervade his poems, which evidently appealed to him as he chose several of Jenko's poems for translation. He says it "seems strange that a poet of Jenko's nature should have written the war-like Slovene national hymn 'Advance!'", which is written in a pan-Slavic spirit and used to be the Slovene national anthem before the state independence in 1991 and which he also decided to translate into English.

Simon Gregorčič seems to have grown closest to Zorman poetic sensibility, because his poems are "characterized by melody, tenderness and intensity" as well as "smooth, melodious quality" (xiv). If Zorman is very modern in briefly describing the poets translated, then he is just somewhat too enthusiastic and exaggerates in the description of Simon Gregorčič's work, his first collection of verse, published in 1882, which was "received with an enthusiasm and joy never

equalled by any other volume of Slovene poetry" (ibid.). Anton Aškerc is labelled as the foremost Slovene epic poet, although Zorman concentrated on his lyrical pieces, which also reveal his "direct, realistic style". There are also Anton Medved and Anton Funtek, nowadays less read Slovene poets. In Medved's verse Zorman found "lofty thoughts", "pessimistic musings", and "classic repose", while some of Funtek's "lightly contemplative" poems attracted him for their "effective musical settings" (ibid.). Looking at the selection of texts for translation into English, it can be observed that Ivan Zorman primarily relied on the following features of poems: their rhythmical, musical qualities, their nationally aware feelings of Slovene and/or Slavic awakening, and finally the simple, most frequently rhymed structure that easily lends itself to be set to music.

Zorman's book of verse translations *Slovene (Jugoslav) Poetry* contains altogether 34 poems by the earlier mentioned poets, most of them by Prešeren, Jenko and Gregorčič. All the poems are published bilingually, which was for his time rather exceptional, if not daring, and even today bilingual editions of verse translations, as many critics maintain, represent one of the best possible ways to publish a selection of any verse in a foreign language. Most of Prešeren's poems translated are very well known to a Slovene reader: "To Music", "Lost Faith", "Whither?", "The Sailor", "The Unwedded Mother", "Memento Mori", and "Sonnet". "Whither?" ("Kam?") is translated into an immaculate English, and British English it is, not American English as it would perhaps be expected. Also the rhyme scheme is mostly perfectly recreated in English, in rhymed couplets (aa, bb, etc):

When rushing on in stormy wrath,  
Friends ask me: Whither speeds thy path?

O rather ask the gloomy cloud,  
O rather ask the sea wave loud

When Master Storm with might profound  
Drives on and madly hurls them round.

The cloud knows not, nor wave, nor I  
Where my despairful goal may lie.

I only feel, I only know  
That I before her may not go,

And that on earth there is no place  
Where I my woe could e'er efface (11).

The well known Prešeren's poem "Nezakonska mati", translated as "The Unwedded Mother" (17), bears witness just how difficult it is sometimes to transpose a poem from one system of linguistic signs into another, from one culture into another. Though translated in mostly consistently structured quatrains,

Zorman added or slightly changed the meaning of individual lines. In the fourth line he, for example, translates "neporočeni materi" (to an unwedded mother) as "a shameful motherhood", where the adjective "shameful" adds a negative value to Prešeren's rather neutral original "neporočeni", although shame can indeed be implied from the rest of the poem. A feature that can immediately be discerned, when looking at the original and the *translatio*, is that his English translations are frequently longer, for paraphrase is used, especially since the poems are rendered from the quantitative metrical system in which the duration of feet is counted (Slovene) into the (English) accentual-syllabic metrical versification system in which the accents and syllables are measured.

Kaj pa je tebe treba bilo,  
dete ljubo, dete lepo,  
meni mladi deklici,  
neporočeni materi? -

\*

Oh, that to me you should have come,  
Dear little one, beautiful!  
I, a youthful maid, unwed -  
Into a shameful motherhood led (16, 17)!

Prešeren's sonnet "Memento mori" (21) is, as regards its form, rendered into English most conscientiously following the rhyme scheme consisting of quatrains and tercets. The content closely follows the original, but its details, may one say as a matter of course, occasionally slightly depart from it. For example, instead of the word "slepoto" (the blindness) of this world, Zorman uses "pleasure", while the expression "v mrtvaškem prtu" (in a death shroud) is simply omitted altogether in order to secure the required number of feet and the appropriate rhyme scheme. It should be said, though, that such frequently unavoidable changes performed on the original are in Zorman's verse translations as rare as they can be, which testifies to his masterful command of both the source and target languages of translation, Slovene and English alike, although he never attended Slovene schools but read most avidly in Slovene.

Naj zmisli, kdor slepoto ljubi sveta,  
in od veselja do veselja leta,  
da smrtna žetev vsak dan bolj dozori.

Znabiti, da kdor zdaj vesel prepeva,  
v mrtvaškem prtu nam pred koncem dneva  
molče trobental bo: "memento mori!"

\*

May he, who pleasure ever contemplates,  
And of frivolity and vainness prates,  
Think well: death's harvest ripens constantly.

Mayhap that he, to-day with mirth aglow,  
To us to-morrow will with trumpet blow  
And sound: Memento mori! silently (20, 21).

Fran Levstik's verse opus is usually considered to be lesser than his critical and prose writings. It is interesting that Zorman should choose five of his lyrical (Romantic) pieces for translation. One possible reason for his selection, and selections are always arbitrary, is that he could easily identify with them, for example with the moody and lonely speaker of the poem in the well-known "Utvi" ("Two Gulls") or the clearly nostalgic "Domotožnost" ("Longing for Home"). The theme of nostalgia and longing for home meant a lot to him, an emigrant abroad, probably more than to an average Slovene reader of these poems at home in Slovenia. It goes without saying that a common motive for all the poems chosen for translation by Ivan Zorman, essentially a trained musician, collected in the bilingual anthology *Slovene (Jugoslav) Poetry* was, as he himself pointed out in the introduction, that all of them were very melodious and were easy to be put to music. In "Two Gulls" (27), consisting of two quatrains, interlocking rhymes are preserved, while the original verb "premišljam" (I contemplate) is more to the point than the translated "I look at":

Premišljam iz okna dve utvi,  
a v meni utriplje srce,  
zamakneno v dneve nekdanje  
na lice usiplje solze.

\*

I look at the gulls from my window,  
My heart with emotion beats fast,  
Hot tears down my cheeks come streaming  
As I think of the days that are past.

Levstik's poem "Longing for Home" (32-3) definitely harps on the strain of emigrant homesickness abroad combined with a nostalgia for youth that is no more, for "There bloomed the blossoms of my youth, / There first I felt love's magic spell, / There I rejoiced in my own dear land, / On native soil my tear-drops fell" (33).

Simon Jenko was most appealing to Ivan Zorman, since he decided to translate six of his poems into English, among them the former (i.e. before the state independence gained in 1991) Slovene national anthem "Naprej!". The choice comes as no surprise in view of Zorman's patriotic feelings in producing this bilingual anthology. The translation itself appears less accomplished than the original, with stress on some sort of pan-Slavonic or Slavic idea within the American "melting pot", which Zorman expressed also on several other occasions. Jenko's poem "Adrijansko morje" ("The Adriatic Sea") was likewise probably chosen for translation by Zorman because of its strongly expressed national awareness, as well as because of its great rhythmical musicality of verse. In contrast to Zorman's other translations, there are relatively numerous changes in

"The Adriatic Sea" (43) with regard to the original. The translation is slightly longer in terms of the length of individual lines, and it also is more abstract than the original, e.g. words like "happiness", "freedom", "fame", "glory" appear in the translation only:

Ko ob tebi mesta bela  
naših dedov so cvetela,  
ko so jadra njih vojske,  
so nosile njih ime.

\*

On thy shores their cities towered,  
Happiness and freedom flowered  
While their vessels bore their name,  
And their sails proclaimed their fame.

Simon Gregorčič's work, the harmony, national consciousness, lyricism, and above all the melodiousness of his verse, seemed a natural text for Zorman's lyrical and musical bent to be translated into English. All of the chosen Gregorčič's poems are lyrical, moody, meditative ("Looking into Innocent Eyes"), and, it could be added, extremely Romantic in stressing the aloneness and melancholy of the speaker of each poem. The choice thus to some extent reveals Zorman's own nature. Gregorčič's poems are beautifully translated into English, into a literary and perhaps slightly archaic English, which adds to the historical patina of the texts. The poem "Sam" ("Alone", 68, 69), along with its unmistakable Romantic feeling, indirectly and metaphorically also shows Zorman's own relative isolation from the contemporary Slovene literary creativity. Zorman's English versions are impeccable, in terms of technical aspects, content and the rhythmical-melodious movement of Simon Gregorčič's verse. It must be noted that Ivan Zorman's own poems were likewise formally simple (a predominant four-line stanza), always most consistently rhymed, which is why many of them were put to music by major music composers, e.g. Emil Adamič, Anton Šubelj, Matija Tomc, etc. Zorman's close affinity with Gregorčič's musical ear and Romantic poetic sensibility made some authors call him, by analogy with Gregorčič, "the Slovene American Nightingale" (Gobec). From among the few translated poems by Anton Aškerc, Anton Medved and Anton Funtek, Aškerc's poem "Mi vstajamo!" ("Our Day is Come", 79) is very indicative of Zorman's pan-Slavic feeling and pride of belonging to a Slavic nation, with some kind of grudge or even threat against the Anglo-Saxon (and Germanic) immigrants in America.

Our day is come! And - you're afraid?  
Why all your fierce excitement!  
You fear the Slav indictment?  
Your conscience feels a heavy guilt,  
Your trembling hand is on the hilt?  
Is it revenge you're fearing  
As countless hosts are nearing?

It is true that Ivan Zorman frequently chose for translation those poems that showed a great sense of national awareness, but it is also true that he chose from the respective opuses of Slovene poets mostly highly melancholic and musical pieces. He was, after all, essentially a musician, and looked for poems that could be easily put to music. This selection reveals and is somehow confirmed also by his own poetic creativity, which, despite its occasional Baroque expression and sentimentality, "brings into Slovene poetry new themes, expresses emotional depth and concern for the destiny of the nation and the future of Slovene emigrants to the U.S.A.". <sup>8</sup> Many of the Slovene poems translated into English published in Zorman's bilingual anthology *Slovene (Jugoslav) Poetry* could be used also today, in an anthological representation of the older classic Slovene literature in the English language. For, translation activity is a two-way traffic: if we Slovenes do promptly translate many and most representative foreign authors, then, we should also do the opposite, "export" our literature and culture to the world, and not just the most recent one, as has most frequently been the case.

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<sup>8</sup> Janez Stanonik, "Ivan Zorman", *SBL*, XIV. Ljubljana: SAZU, 1986: 855-56.