

IRENA BIRSA: AN AUSTRALIAN POET AND SCHOLAR OF SLOVENE DESCENT

Igor Maver

Many Slovene migrants in Australia, especially those belonging to the younger generation have come to accept Australia as a new, second homeland, a lucky »sunburnt« and in many ways promised country. Of course, children born to Slovene parents in Australia regard themselves as Australians (of Slovene descent, as specified by the title), but they are interested in, if not downright obsessed with, their »roots«. Like so many other migrants from various other emitive countries of the world, their parents have gone through the process of adaptation and assimilation, which is why their children experience a certain linguistic dividedness that is, however, to be regarded as a new positive value. Consequently, they sometimes use in their writing, along with English, also Slovene. The question remains whether or not their work is to be considered part of Slovene (migrant) literature? For these poets traditional »migrant« themes are for the most part no longer true, such as for example the exaggerated sentimental nostalgia for home or the difficulties to assert oneself in a new environment. Rather, their poems transcend these issues and deal with general existential or philosophical questions, impressions taken from the Australian landscape and cityscape, coloured, however, by the typical Slovene melancholy. The artistic level of poetry and its literary articulation written by Slovene migrants in Australia has consistently and considerably risen since the major inflow of migrants right after the Second World War, at the beginning of the fifties. Some bilingualism can be noticed also in the work of the major Slovene migrant poets of the first generation writing primarily in the Slovene language, such as are, for example, Bert Pribac, Pavla Gruden, Danijela Hliš and Jože Žohar (cf. Maver 1998). This study focuses on the scant but fine verse output and the important migrant research conducted by Irena Birsa.

Irena Birsa was born to Slovene parents in 1961 in a migrant camp, where her parents were placed upon their arrival to Australia. Thus she represents the so-called »second generation« of Slovene migrants to Australia or rather a first-generation Australian of Slovene descent, since most migrants tend to reject hyphenation such as, for example, Australian-Slovenes. Birsa studied towards an M. A. degree and researched the history of Slovenes in Victoria. The result of her work is the book *Slovenians in Australia* (Birsa 1994), which was published posthumously, after Birsa's untimely death in 1991. It brings a selection of her articles and essays on the social and cultural history of Slovene migrants in Australia. She was posthumously awarded an M. Ed. degree from La Trobe University in Melbourne for the book which is a valuable source of information and a selection of field material for all those who are professionally or otherwise interested in the Australian migrant community, in the Slovene press, ethnic radio, religious institutions, process of migration and cultural activity of Slovenes living in Australia.

Keith Simkin, the editor (and Birsa's supervisor) of the volume *Slovenians in Australia*, in his preface notes that the book is a collection of Irena Birsa's academic writing from 1984 to 1991, which was to represent the core of her Master of Education Degree thesis and which was partly published in various journals and books in Australia, Slovenia and the United States of America. In her thesis she tried to examine the geographical, historical, ethnographical and social origins of Slovene migrants in Australia and, more specifically, in Victoria. She tried to understand the world migrants (like her parents) created out of old values and new opportunities. As can be seen from the various chapters of the book, she had a keen interest in the history of Slovene religious institutions, clubs, newspapers and Slovene language programmes on the migrant radio broadcasts. There is also a brief biographical prefatory note by Draga Gelt, who also provided an original cover design for the book, red (Slovene) carnations »flying« – migrating to Australia, thus symbolically representing the Slovene and Australian sources of Irena Birsa's inspiration both as a scholar and poet.

Chapter 1 (»Australian Immigration Policies«) introduces the Australian context, while chapters 2, 3 and 4 (»Emigration from Yugoslavia and Slovenia«, »Slovenian Immigration to Australia«, »Slovenian Settlements in Victoria«) analyze the demographic and economic reasons for migration to Australia and Simkin makes it clear that »the early chapters of this volume were written before the momentous events of 1991 which transformed Yugoslavia«, for »the primary meaning of the term 'Yugoslavia' in her writings is the geopolitical area in the Balkan

peninsula...« (vi). The drafts for these chapters were written between 1988 and 1989, based on the material researched in Australia or sent from Slovenia, and in 1990, when Birsa was a visiting scholar at the University of Ljubljana. Chapter 5 («Slovenian Religious Institutions in Victoria») researches the religious institutions and their importance in the social life of Slovene migrants in Victoria, while chapter 6 is devoted to the possibilities of ethnic radio («Ethnic Radio in Australia and Slovenian Language Broadcasting: Development and Direction»). Chapters 7 to 9 explore one of Birsa's favourite themes, Slovene migrant press, and have for the most part already been presented at conferences or separately published before («The Development of a Slovenian Press in Australia: A Short History of *Vestnik*, 1955–1987«, «The Slovenian Press in Australia«, «History and Future of the Slovenian Press in Australia»). The final three chapters (10 to 12) of the book («More than Just an Ethnic Group«, «Slovenian Research in Progress«, «Assimilation vs Multiculturalism. Problems in Australia's Immigration Policy») show just how topical Birsa's ideas were/are. She was critical both of «those Australian attitudes which expected all immigrants to assimilate and which drove Slovenian children to reject the culture of their parents» and of «the Australian policy of multiculturalism which she saw as locking immigrants into positions of inferior economic and social status and as depriving their culture of respect and real, living value» (viii).

In addition to her scholarly interests Birsa wrote poems in English which, with a few exceptions, were not published and exist solely in a manuscript form and not many people know of them. They are highly Impressionistic, with images taken from nature. Some of them also deal with migrant themes, though not exclusively. In the latter ones she juxtaposes the calmness in nature, reminding her of «home», the home of her parents, Slovenia, and, on the other hand, «Little Slovenia» in Melbourne, where her home is and the adopted home of her parents. The poem «Our Little Suburban Plot of Land» (Birsa 1991), for example, contains numerous alliterations and the tiny canary is an effective metaphor representing a migrant, who sings only now and then, «Communicating with the local birds / On something / she / will never understand». In her view even the noise of modern Melbourne cannot «defeat» «Little Slovenia», for the national feelings of its people are strong and die hard. The poems «Summer's First peach» and «The Budding Rose» are again full of alliterations built on the impressions taken from nature, images of calmness that correspond to her state of mind. The peach turns out to be a metaphor representing life, ended suddenly in resignation, while the tyranny of time slowly eats up her youth, «my tiny rose». Birsa's poems are fine

lyrical Impressionistic poems poetically expressing her feelings about life's transience and existential anguish. Birsa's philosophy of life is best expressed in her poem »Thoughts« found in a notebook among her school papers and first published in the book *Slovenians in Australia* (v):

Thoughts

Life is but a passing thought,
it drifts beyond our consciousness;
when alternative topics do not avail,
the question of life is what we sought.
Although we can never conclude,
we attain an inevitable peacefulness
and gain in our hearts,
a sense of solitude.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Birsa, Irena. 1991. Our Little Suburban Plot of Land. In Barbara Suša, In Memoriam, Irena Birsa, avstralska Slovenka, *Knjiga*, 8/9, p. 304. The author wishes to thank Mrs Birsa from Melbourne for the manuscripts of unpublished poems.
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POVZETEK

**IRENA BIRSA: AVSTRALSKA PESNICA IN
ZNANSTVENICA SLOVENSKEGA RODU**

Igor Maver

Članek obravnava delo Irene Birsa, ki se je rodila leta 1961 slovenskim staršem v Avstraliji in tako predstavlja t.i. »drugo generacijo« slovenskih izseljencev v Avstraliji oziroma Avstralko »prve generacije« slovenskega rodu. Najprej je analizirano Birsino raziskovalno delo, ki ga je opravila v letih od 1984 do 1991 za svojo magistrsko nalogo na Univerzi La Trobe s področja družbene in kulturne zgodovine slovenskih izseljencev v Avstraliji, s posebnim poudarkom na državi Victoriji in mestu Melbourne, kjer je živela. Spričo Birsine prerane smrti delo ni povsem dokončano, a njena knjiga Slovenians in Australia, s članki, eseji in razpravami, ki je izšla posmrtno leta 1994, je relativno neznan, a zelo dragocen vir podatkov in analiz za vse tiste, ki jih profesionalno ali kako drugače zanima zgodovina slovenske izseljenske skupnosti v Avstraliji, še posebej v Victoriji. V drugem delu članka so predstavljene nekatere subtilno dovršene Birsine pesmi v angleščini, ki so ostale v rokopisu in so javnosti bolj ali manj neznanе.