

SLOVENE-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS AND POETS IN THE 1930S: BETWEEN LITERATURE AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT¹

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The 1930s was one of the most difficult decades in American history. But in these same years one relatively small immigrant community in the United States – the Slovene community – experienced an amazing cultural productivity partially fueled by some very dynamic women writers and poets. Their names were known by the Slovene immigrants in the United States, because they were also active as public lecturers, teachers of the Slovene language, managers of local clubs, choral conductors and directors of dramatic performances.

The cultural activity of Slovenes in America as that of other immigrant groups developed around their mutual benefit societies. In this paper I will concentrate on the case of the *Slovenska narodna podporna jednota* (Slovene National Benefit Society) or *SNPJ*, one of the major Slovene mutual-aid societies in the United States. This organization published two papers: *Prosveta* (Enlightenment) – the paper for the members of the adult department and *Mladinski list*–Juvenile (now *The Voice of Youth*) for the under-sixteen members. In 1929 Ivan Molek became the first editor in chief of all the *SNPJ* publications. He understood the importance of involving Slovene-American writers and poets as contributors to his papers. A number of young immigrant women answered his appeal, such as Katka Zupančič, Anna Praček Krasna and a second generation Slovene-American Mary Jugg.

For more than a decade their poems, short stories, articles and dramatic sketches were the core of the youth magazine *Mladinski list*. Readers' letters to the paper reveal how these authors were accepted heartily by the young members. Katka Zupančič excelled in her numerous children's poems which she also illustrated. Even though she wrote mainly in Slovene she managed to appeal to her readers through simple language and scenes that were close to the young readers' experience. Her writings encompassed all the harshness of immigrant life, but were softened by humor and the use of a child's point of view. In her poems and short stories Anna Praček Krasna reproduced her autobiographical experiences first as a child in the old country during the first world war the first and then as a young woman in search of a job in New York city which she called *the Babylon*. She wrote in Slovene as well as in English and her short stories

¹ This paper was presented at the AAASS 34th National Convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in November 2002.

brought the children of the immigrants closer to the world of their parents. Krasna's best poems portrayed the Great Depression in New York and gave voice to humble figures pressed to the margins of society by the Crash. In her short stories and poems Mary Jugg also depicted the Great Depression realistically, but with an emphasis on how modern education and science could improve the living conditions. Her poetry, however, is more introspective and self-referential: in particular she investigated the individual soul in the crucial moment of facing one's limits and fears.

These women also contributed to other Slovene papers in America: the socialist weekly *Proletarec* (The Proletarian), the yearly *Ameriški družinski koledar* (American family almanac), the monthly literary magazine *Cankarjev glasnik* (Cankar's Herald) and *Majski glasnik - The May Herald*, issued on May Day. Additionally all three were activists inside the Slovene community and inside the socialist movement in particular. Their literary productivity as well as their community work demonstrate a clear commitment to the younger generation. For instance, Katka Zupančič was a teacher of Slovene at the SNPJ English speaking lodge *Pioneer 559* but also a prompter and a director of dramatic performances at the *Chicago Socialist Club*. In the years 1934-36 Mary Jugg organized a youth group called the *Red Falcons* for the same Socialist club and in 1938 she played a central role in promoting the creation of *Juvenile Circles* at the SNPJ. In 1931 Anna Praček Krasna gave a series of English and Slovene speeches to Slovene immigrant communities throughout America in a tour organized by the *Yugoslav Socialist Federation (JSZ)*.

Women's issues, as well as youth issues, interested these writers, as shown in articles by Anna Praček Krasna and Mary Jugg that appeared in *Proletarec* and *Prosveta*.² In *Proletarec* from December 1931 to June 1932 Krasna had a weekly column "Ženska v preteklosti in sedanosti" (The Woman in the Past and Present) where she investigated women's roles in literature, arts and science, with a focus on successful female writers as a proof of women's intellectual equality with men. In her weekly column Krasna discussed the significance of women first in domestic industry and then in the development of modern economics. She drew attention to the role of women in the work force, in particular immigrant workers employed as factory workers, housemaids and waitresses. Krasna challenged the assumption that the entrance of women into the labor market was one of the causes of the Great Depression. Men, she argued, should stop considering women workers as a threat and understand that men and women must struggle together for the improvement of the condition of the working class as a whole.

Although Anna Praček Krasna aimed at giving women a socialist education to women, her writings did not undermine the traditional woman's role inside society. She always considered woman's issues in relation to working class goals. This idea is also

² Some examples: Anna Praček Krasna, "Nekoliko o potrebi delavske zavednosti med ženstvom" (Some Words about the Need of a Working-class Consciousness among Women), *Proletarec*, 24th July 1930, 5 and 31st July 1930, 6; "Delavska žena in delavska izobrazba" (The Woman Worker and the Education of Workers), 30th April 1931, 8; "Ženstvo in vojna" (Women and War), *Proletarec*, 25th June 1931, 4; "Delavska literatura" (Working-class Literature), *Proletarec*, 16th July 1931, 4.

present in her poems. She saw women as wives who support their husbands in working class struggles and as mothers who instruct children to bring a better world for all. The woman is portrayed as the striving "Pietà" mother – as the Holy Virgin holding the dead Christ – but still weathering her grief with courage and composure.³ Krasna is the outside voice recording the life stories of women figures at the borders of society, such as old beggar women or the immigrant women she saw on the New York streets.⁴

A more radical attitude towards women's issues was expressed in the articles by Mary Jugg. She started to contribute to *Proletarec* in 1934 and one of her first articles was "Is Socialism a Woman's Concern?" where she appealed to women to get involved in socialism and to realize the importance of class struggle.⁵ In her weekly column "For Women Only" which she wrote from January to June 1936 she challenged many of the assumptions that women took for granted. Women slaving inside four walls without complaint had "to awake from that drowsy sleep of suffering", realize that there "is no 'recorder' of their good deeds" in some other world and that a lot can be done in this world for the improvement of their condition.

However, in her column Mary Jugg was particularly keen to reconsider the role of women inside the Yugoslav Socialist Branch. She realized that even though women were members of this organization with equal rights, their status did not cross the kitchen's threshold:

Too many of our male comrades have the idea that there is "a woman's place".

[...] Women are very active inside the Socialist Branch, but men look at their activities as 'women's affairs' and they are not supposed to have any voice in the management of the Branch and in politics.⁶

[...] If they can perform all the office of men in one kind of enterprise, isn't it logical they are capable of doing the same in other fields?⁷

Her challenge of societal constraints sometimes found its way also into her literary writings. For instance, in Mary Jugg's "Lines on Spring" published in the youth magazine *Mladinski list*, the "I" of the poem could be seen as a specifically female voice and her discourse as an exhortation for women's independence. This is how the poem goes:

If I could only

Burst the shell

And

³ For instance in the poem "Mati sedem žalosti" (Mother of Seven Sorrows), *Ameriški družinski koledar*, 1933, 28 and "Žena" (The Wife), *Proletarec*, 30th April 1930, 9.

⁴ Such as those published in *Mladinski list*–Juvenile "Starke na Bowery" (Old Women on Bowery), 1936, XV, 12, 359; "Sosedu" (Neighbor), 1937, XVI, 4, 97; "Tri matere" (Three Mothers), 1936, XV, 2, 34; "Matere čakajo" (Mothers are Waiting), 1936, XV, 11, 353; "Mati krpa" (Mother is patching up), 1932, XI, 9, 259.

⁵ *Proletarec*, 21st November 1934, 7.

⁶ M. Jugg, "For Women Only," *Proletarec*, 1st April 1936, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, *Proletarec*, 8th April 1936, 6.

Crumble the barriers
That shut us in...

But I can only
Do private housecleaning,
Remembering
That the walls of ignorance
Are strongly cemented
By traditions of the many.⁸

In her articles Mary Jugg also wrote about women's position in larger American society. She investigated the United States democratic institutions and discussed inequality between the sexes. For instance, in her article about the First of May she asserted that women stand on an equal level with men, but then in each of the following paragraphs she ironically reversed this assertion. She discussed gender roles ("she is still very much a 'woman' with a definite job that belongs to women"), morality ("if she behaves like a human being, uses her common sense, and really seems a normal person – well 'she is a bit questionable'"), wages ("if she works as hard as men, that is good and proper, but if she expects the same wages for the same kind of work – well, 'she shouldn't get as much because she isn't quite as capable'").⁹ She also expressed a rather radical position about child bearing, stating that it denies women their best years in terms of creativity and intellectual involvement and it makes them lag behind men in the advancement in the society. She indicates a possible solution to organize kindergartens and nurseries with well equipped staff taking care of the children while mothers are at work.¹⁰

On the one hand, my research so far reveals that women connected with the SNPJ were particularly concerned with the younger generation. They were not only major contributors to its youth magazine, but they were also the key workers who tried to involve the children of immigrants in the organizations the immigrants established at the beginning of the century. In the 1930s youth involvement was becoming more and more crucial to the continuity and future existence of these organizations. On the other hand, the study demonstrates a substantial difference in understanding the woman's role inside the community. The first generation women – the original immigrants – did not dare to challenge woman's traditional role in society and they accepted her role as a mother and wife rather than an independent worker. The second generation – the immigrant women's daughters – would eventually challenge these assumptions held not only by the immigrant community but also by the larger American society.

⁸ "Lines on Spring", *ML*, 1934, 5, 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*, *Proletarec*, 29th April 1936, 6.

¹⁰ M. Jugg "For Women Only- Babies in Coop.", *Proletarec*, 18th March 1936 and 25th March 1936, 6.

POVZETEK

SLOVENSKOAMERIŠKE PISATELJICE IN PESNICE V TRIDESETIH LETIH 20. STOLETJA MED LITERATURO IN DRUŽBENO ANGAŽIRANOSTJO

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Trideseta leta so čas hude gospodarske krize v Ameriki, a tudi obdobje, ko so slovenske naselbine v Ameriki posebno dejavne na kulturnem področju. V to delovanje so se uspešno vključevale tudi nekatere ženske. Članek se osredotoča na delovanje kulturnih delavk Katke Zupančič, Anne Praček Krasne in Mary Jugg, ki so bile aktivne v okviru Slovenske narodne podporne jednote (SNPJ). Pisale so članke in literarne prispevke tako v glasilih SNPJ Prosveto in Mladinski list-Juvenile kot v socialistični tednik Proletarec, v Ameriški družinski koledar, Majski glas in Cankarjev glasnik. Hkrati so se uveljavljale pri dramskih postavitvah, kulturnih programih, recitacijah, pri vodenju mladinskih krožkov ali kot učiteljice tečajev slovenskega jezika. Na eni strani se je njihovo kulturno delovanje usmerjalo predvsem v delo z mladimi, na drugi pa so se ukvarjale z ženskim vprašanjem. Tako je Anna Praček Krasna od decembra 1931 do junija 1932 v Proletarcu imela tedensko rubriko "Ženska v preteklosti in sedanjosti", Mary Jugg pa od januarja do julija 1936 "For Women Only" (samo za ženske). Čeprav se je Anna Praček Krasna nadejala izobraziti ženske v socialističnem duhu, je žensko vprašanje vedno obravnavala v sklopu delavske ideologije in njeni članki niso izpodbijali tradicionalne vloge ženske v družbi. Drznejša pa je bila v svojih člankih Mary Jugg, ki je izpostavljala predsodke, katerim so bile ženske vsakodnevno izpostavljene in ki so bili prisotni tako znotraj priseljske skupnosti kot v širši ameriški družbi.

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