

## IVAN DOLENC AND JOHN KRIZANC: TWO CANADIAN AUTHORS OF SLOVENE ORIGIN

M i r k o J u r a k

Literary creativity among Slovene emigrants in Canada does not have such a long and rich tradition as that of our immigrants in the United States; nevertheless, there are a number of authors writing in Canada whose works deserve literary analysis as well as the attention of the public in both countries. I hope that these few critical remarks will further increase interest in the works of Ivan Dolenc and John Krizanc.<sup>1</sup>

Ivan Dolenc, who migrated from Slovenia to Canada in 1957, published in 1983 a book, **Za dolar človečnosti (For a Dollar of Humanity)**<sup>2</sup>, which is a biographical account of an immigrant's arrival to Canada and the first year of his stay there. It is a work showing the typical struggle of an immigrant for survival and success in a foreign country, amidst different surroundings, among people whose language he does not master fully. Dolenc was born in 1927 in Maribor, Slovenia, and he studied Slavic languages and literatures at the University of Ljubljana. Then he worked as a journalist and translator, as well as a theatre and literary critic. His works have been published in Slovenia, Canada and the United States of America.<sup>3</sup>

The second author to be briefly discussed here is John Krizanc, the son of a Slovene immigrant, who was born in Lethbridge, Alberta, and who now lives in Toronto. He has written some poetry and several screen plays, but his main interest lies in writing for the theatre. He also helped found the Necessary Angel Theatre Company in Toronto. His most successful plays include so far **Tamara** (first produced in Toronto on 8 May 1981), which has been produced in Mexico City, New York and Los Angeles, where it won the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Award. A second of his plays that has

received a lot of intention is **Prague** (written in 1983 and first shown in Toronto on 20 Nov. 1984).<sup>4</sup> For **Prague**, Krizanc received the Governor-General's Award, the highest literary award in Canada.

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Dolenc's **Za dolar človečnosti** ends with an episode in which the narrator, his wife and their three daughters move to Toronto from a small provincial town in Winnipeg, where life was lonely, ruled by Victorian principles and governed by the brutality of struggle for money-making. The hero comments on their decision as follows:

*»We did not speak about the misery of our difficult beginnings in the midst of the Canadian Prairie. We were ready to leave behind everything, really everything. Also painful memories.*

*In Toronto we shall be among our native people. There are a few thousand of them, and as many Yugoslavs as you wish. They have their own papers, society, homes and our books ...«* (p. 190)

Toronto appeals to the narrator and his family because it is a conglomerate of immigrants from all parts of the world. It is »close« to Europe and to their native land.

*»Our girls will no longer be foreigners there,' lovingly whispered his wife. 'We shall all be just Canadian.'«* (p. 191)

The duality of the immigrant's spiritual life - his emotional attachment to the old country and to the reality of his physical environment - is predominant theme of many works written by immigrants. Here also, the hero of the novel suffers from this split, and he knows that it is best for him and his family to get accustomed to the new society. Therefore, we can understand the optimistic tone and the happy vision of a new, harmonious life, one which will be a combination of the old and the new worlds.

The novel is preceded by a poem written by Janko Glazer, a poet from the northeastern part of Slovenia, titled »Domotožje« (Homesickness) in which the poet longs for green pastures and vales where he could lie down and be rid of sad thoughts.

Dolenc is primarily interested in sad or even tragic scenes

from the lives of various Yugoslav immigrants who can get some sympathy only from prostitutes, buying it from them for a few dollars. It is life stretched between two extremes, hope and despair; and some of the immigrants are too weak in personality to overcome both the external difficulties and their emotional problems. The novel is written in a progressive, straightforward type of narrative, with a number of digressions (mainly in the second half of the novel) during which short tales connected with the author are included. The technique of composition of the novel was obviously dictated by the problems dealt with, by the subject-matter of the novel, as well as by the variety and richness of the narrator's experiences, many of which are so, so typical of all immigrants.

Dolenc's language mainly has a denotative character, although the author occasionally uses metaphors to stress and broaden the narrators experiences, to make them more universal, more refined. He often feels great compassion for his compatriots, some of whom are really much worse off than he is because they do not know the language and do not have any education. He remembers, for example, Blagoje, whom he met in Austria and who could not migrate to Canada because of his health problems. The narrator advises him to return home, knowing that new circumstances would be too difficult for Blagoje, even if he was allowed to enter Canada. Some immigrants try to live in their dreams when they come to Canada, and Dolenc points out that this cannot be a proper solution. He observes how some immigrants become completely money-minded, so that wealth becomes a substitute for moral values. A consumers' society may devour a man, ruin his life, his marriage, and make that man lose his integrity, unless he is strong, like the Serbian Rade, who has not only survived all the hardships, but is also willing to help his compatriots. Stipe, who came to Canada soon after World War I, got acclimatized to the Canadian landscape and society, but he is a lonely walker, self-centred and only relatively happy. The gallery of characters in the novel is really wide. Each one of these immigrants has his own fate, although the fates of many of them are similar. The narrator makes friends with immigrants from Yugoslavia regardless of their nationality, only judging them - or rather accepting them - upon the criteria of morality and spiritual nearness.

Those people whose official duty was to look after immigrants are not always shown as the best kind of people, for a number of them are soulless administrators who only do their jobs and are not really interested in the man in front of them. To them he may be »just a bloody foreigner« (p. 184). The narrator obviously has high intellectual aspirations and he realizes that in order to find an independent, suitable position in Canadian society he must get to know it better. One of the ways is through literature, and so he reads his first Canadian works by Hugh Gerner, Gabrielle Roy and Morley Callaghan. This gives him more self-confidence, and he wants to express himself too - he begins to write short stories, which are soon published in various Yugoslav magazines issued in Canada, magazines such as **Edinost** and **Naš kalendar**. Once he has thus found his place in Canada, his own self really, he starts to question himself about reasons for migration and its consequences. Although he finds some plausible answers, he knows that he will be forever torn between the two countries. However, **some** of his dreams have been fulfilled, and he is ready to forget all the hardships, to accept Canada as his new home.

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The advertising leaflet for **Tamara** includes a brief description of the author's personality and announces him as »one of the fortunate few in the world who never had the slightest doubt what he wanted to do in life,« for he always wanted to be a writer. The theatre world is close to that of writers, and Krizanc shows us, in **Prague**, a company which is about to put on a play. The core of his play is about the external and the inner circumstances that arise out of this decision. **Prague** was begun as a medieval epic, **Magnificat**, but then it was turned into a play within a play, embodying emblems, or historical issues, which have bothered mankind through centuries and still bother them - in some countries more than in the others, no doubt. Thus, this is also a political play, but one which includes elements of a thriller.

The company, which wants to produce a new play, is controlled and spied upon by two people - a member of the Ministry of Culture, Zuzanna Jancocova, who controls its

activity and whose husband works for the Ministry of Interior, and by Major Zrak, a police investigator. Although some counterfeit money seems to be in question, the real target of their investigation is the ideas embodied in the play which the company wants to produce. The question is whether these ideas are not too provocative, too independent, for the existing one-party system which tries to make everybody think and act in the same way. Peter Vala, a former Artistic Director of the company, who was replaced in his position when he refused to join the Party, reads a passage from the new play and comments upon it and upon his role of Dubcek:

*»Listen to this: 'The people long for a society in which they can live as humans among humans - a society in which a man isn't silent because he's afraid but because he's content and no longer needs to fight for his freedom.' That's it! There's been a thaw! They're using Kura (a playwright who is really only concerned about himself, M.J.) to announce there's been a thaw! It's spring '68 again! That's what this ending is saying. It says it's time to ease up and allow some more freedoms.«* (p. 54)

We see that Peter cannot believe that the playwright Kura himself decided to advocate more freedom, and therefore he says that »they're using« him. »They« is, of course, the totalitarian government which makes decisions about everything. The audience cannot be surprised to see that every person in this play is a double personality, changing his/her views depending on the person with whom he/she speaks. The changed ending is discovered, and the actors are only allowed to deliver »the correct ending« which has been approved by the Orwellian Ministry of Culture. The actors are forced to accept the official truth. Even when Vladimir tells the truth that he wrote the play, Zuzanna cannot accept it and tells him and the other actors:

*»Now ... I am telling you and everyone here agrees with me, that you did not write this ending.«* (p. 99)

Vladimir's objection is ignored; Zuzanna still has enough power over people so that she can tell them what to believe and to keep them quiet. If the evidence does not suit her and her masters, she can make it disappear. The question is only for

how long. Of course, her appeal to »a scientific worldview« has meaning only if she can manipulate people, suit the reality to her ideological concept, that is, only when she can terrify the people, »the actors« or »the clowns«, as they - the theatre company - appear to her. The author's ironic undertone, which is directed towards people who are not self-aware, is clear. However, the play does not end on this note. The playwright allows the last word to Vladimir and his decision not to accept lies as the truth - truth which will, no doubt, be made known one day. Vladimir says:

*»Honza, tell them - I did it! Tell them the truth!«*  
(p. 99)

As long as there are people who know the truth there is a chance, more than a chance maybe, that the truth will definitely become known.

Although **Za dolar človečnosti** and **Tamara** are different in many ways - in genre, in subject-matter, in the author's view of reality - nevertheless, one can say that they have an important common feature and that is the viewpoint that it is man's desire to get to know the truth, to be free and be able to lead his life honestly and with integrity.

## NOTES

1. This is a slightly shortened version of my article »Slovenska izseljenska književnost v Kanadi. Literarni »trend«: spoznati novo okolje in ohraniti svojo identiteto.« Delo, Književni listi, 18.1.1990, str. 14
2. Ivan Dolenc, *Za dolar človečnosti* (For a Dollar of Humanity), Ljubljana, Prešernova družba, 1983. All quotations are taken from this edition, translated by Mirko Jurak.
3. Janez Stanonik, »Ivan Dolenc«, *Enciklopedija Slovenije* II, Ljubljana, Mladinska knjiga, 1987, str. 285
4. John Krizanc, Prague, Toronto, Playwrights Canada, 1987. All quotations are from this edition.

## POVZETEK

IVAN DOLENC IN JOHN KRIZANC:  
DVA KANADSKA AVTORJA SLOVENSKEGA RODU

M i r k o J u r a k

Literarno ustvarjanje slovenskih izseljencev v Kanadi nima zelo dolge in bogate tradicije, kljub temu dela nekaterih pisateljev slovenskega rodu prve in druge generacije zaslužijo, da jih bralci spoznajo.

Leta 1983 je Ivan Dolenc izdal roman *Za dolar človečnosti*, v katerem prikazuje tipični boj izseljencev za preživetje in uspeh. Izseljenčeva družina se ob koncu romana preseli iz podeželja v Toronto, da bodo med svojimi rojaki in »bliže« domovini. Dolenc prikazuje dualizem v mišljenju in čustvovanju izseljencev, ki so navezani tako na staro kot na novo domovino. V romanu je predstavljena vrsta oseb in njihovih žalostnih ali celo tragičnih usod. V premočrtni pripovedni tehniki se nizajo dogodki eden za drugim, nekatere scene so vključene v pripoved kot zastranitve osnovne zgodbe. Končni vtis romana je, da se izseljenci morajo prilagoditi novi deželi in ne pretrgati vezi z domovino, saj pripadajo obema.

Poleg *Tamare* je *Praga* drugo najpomembnejše delo Johna Krizanca, sina slovenskega izseljenca, ki se je že doslej izkazal kot zelo uspešen dramatik. V drami *Praga*, ki je nastala 1983 in je bila objavljena v Torontu leta 1987, upodablja Krizanc izsek iz življenja in dela neke češke igralske družine, nad katero »bedita« dva policijska agenta, ki pazita, da ne bi igralci razširjali svobodomiselnih idej. Avtoritarna oblast še vedno drži vse niti v svojih rokah in agentka posmehljivo imenuje igralce »klovne«, saj ve, da se pretvarjajo in zaradi bojazni ne govore resnice. Toda v zadnji sceni pride resnica vendarle na dan, kar nakazuje dramatikovo optimistično vizijo prihodnosti.

Avtorja obeh obravnavanih del torej očitno izpostavljata v njih človekovo željo, da spozna resnico, da je svoboden in da lahko živi pošteno ter ohranja svojo integriteto.