

SLOVENE MIGRANT LITERATURE IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

This article on the literary creativity of Slovene migrants in Australia after the Second World War, including the most recent publications, discusses only the most artistically accomplished authors and addresses those works that have received the most enthusiastic reception by the critics and readers alike. Of course, those who are not mentioned are also important to the preservation of Slovene culture and identity among the Slovene migrants in Australia from a documentary, historical, or ethnological points of view. However, the genres featured here include the explicitly literary, the semi-literary fictionalized biography, the memoir and documentary fiction, and the literary journalistic text - all those fields and genres that nowadays straddle the division line between 'high' literature and so-called 'creative fiction'.

Artistic merit cannot be and is not the sole criterion in discussing migrant writing; however, it is only artistic relevance that has the power to reach readers beyond a work's context of origin and that guarantees the text in question a lasting value and a secure place in a literary culture (of readers and publishers), in Slovenia and Australia. As to the literary genres in Slovene migrant writing, (confessional) poetry is by far predominant, followed by short fiction, biographical and documentarist fiction and, more recently, several novels. Literary critics that have so far mostly written about Slovene migrant writing produced in Australia are Mirko Jurak, Barbara Suša and the author of this article.

Slovene migrant literature in Australia, despite its relatively short existence in comparison with that in the U.S.A., but due to its swift growth and artistic quality, definitely deserves special mention and research. Quite a few of its *literati* have by the beginning of the new millenium published independently their collections of poems or prose works in Australia as well as in Slovenia, and have seen a warm reception. On the other hand, the most productive and successful among them justifiably ask themselves why they have not yet been included in the most significant Slovene literary anthologies and histories, in light of the publicly proclaimed artistic merit of their literary work. They do not wish to be pushed, in Slovenia too, into a kind of ghetto, in which many migrant writers nevertheless still nowadays find themselves in the Australian 'multicultural' environment.

It goes without saying that within the Slovene migrant community there emerges also the problem of the language, English, which is mastered fully by the second generation of authors (Michelle Leber, Irena Birska) and by some representatives of the first generation of migrants to Australia (Bert Pribac, Pavla Gruden, Danijela Hliš, etc). The most important body of migrant writings is, of course, still published in the Slovene language, although works by the Slovene migrants written in English (or bilingually), one may claim, also belong within the framework of Slovene literary sensibility and creativity, a phenomenon that can be found also with some other migrant-emitive European nations. Bilingualism (e.g. collections of poems in English and Slovene) results from a longstanding physical and spiritual displacement, whereby many migrants artistically and intimately increasingly experience Australia as their new or 'second homeland'. Slovene migrant experience has recently seen its first major literary expression (and film version) outside the Slovene diaspora, in the novel by the Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* from 1998 (Jurak 1999). Flanagan took as the basis of his book the tragic life story of his wife Sonja, a Slovene migrant who had arrived to live in Australia at an early age with her parents after the Second World War.

The literary creativity of Slovene migrants in Australia started soon after the biggest influx of migration to Australia right after World War II at the beginning of the fifties. It was then that the publication of the journal *Misli* started (1952), where along with the discussion of religious issues and life among the migrants the Slovene Catholic priests first tried their hand also at writing literary pieces (Rev Klavdij Okorn, Rev Bernard Ambrožič). Later laypersons started publishing their works in the journal, among them Neva Rudolf and Ivan Burnik-Legiša. Rudolf lived in Australia only a couple of years; however, with her collection of poems *Južni križ* (The Southern Cross, 1958) and the collection of sketches *Avstralske črtice*, Australian Sketches), though not published on Australian ground, she was one of the first literary authors among the Slovenes living in Australia. With the publication of the migrant magazine *Vestnik* literary creativity received a new impetus and a new possibility of getting migrant literature published. Ivan Burnik-Legiša, despite his numerous collections of verse, has drawn critical attention only very recently with his collections *Jesensko listje* (Autumn Leaves, 1991), *Za pest drobiža* (For a Handful of Coins, 1993), and *Hrepenenje in sanje* (Yearning and Dreams, 1995). In the poems he recollects his youth at home in Slovenia; it seems he has never come to accept the new Australian environment as his very own, while, clearly estranged, he does not feel at home in Slovenia either.

The first book in the Slovene language to be published in Australia was the collection of poems by Bert Pribac *Bronasti tolkač* (The Bronze Knocker, 1962). Among his numerous publications, the collections *V kljunu golobice* (In the Beak of a Dove, 1973) and *Prozorni ljudje* (Transparent People, 1991) have to be mentioned, which indicate that Pribac with his substantial quality literary output ranks along with Jože Žohar and Pavla Gruden among the very best Slovene migrant poets in Australia (Maver 1994). In 2000 was published (in Koper in Slovenia) the second edition of his first collection *Bronasti tolkač* with some additional poems. In these the poet, both a Slovene Istrian and an Australian, symbolically returns to Slovenia, although he remains split between the two countries, »ne v tej ne v oni domovini / do dna zasidran, / a vendar

ujet v ljubezni do obeh ...» (Pribac 1999: 199). Pribac can be placed high among Slovene poets. It is true that his early verse is characterized by a somewhat Baroque language, coupled with the typical migrant nostalgia and longing for home. However, he quickly outgrew this early apprentice stage to mature into a subtle Impressionist poet of his native Slovene Istria along the Adriatic Sea and his 'new' second homeland, Australia. He can for this reason also be called a poet of two homelands, who feels at home here in Slovenia and 'down under' in Australia, who uses in his verse images taken from both lands and whose poetry as all good verse transcends the borders of space and time to address universally valid issues.

Bert Pribac was together with Jože Žohar, Jože Čuješ and Danijela Hliš a co-founder of SALUK (1983), the Slovene-Australian Literary and Cultural Circle, which was founded as a natural outgrowth of the literary magazine *Svobodni razgovori* (cf. Suša 1996, 1999). This magazine, established in 1982 by the very energetic editor Pavla Gruden, was a natural Slovene literary response to *Naš list*, a literary journal of Yugoslav migrant writers in Australia and New Zealand. SALUK gathered most literary Slovenes in Australia, but its foremost merit is that it brought its exponents during the eighties into close contact with their Slovene counterparts, resulting in numerous publications of Slovene migrant authors in Slovenia and several organized tours, prior to and especially after the independence of Slovenia in 1991, which its literature somehow anticipated. There were three major anthologies published during that time by SIM, the Slovene Emigrant Association, which featured fictional and verse works by the authors gathered in SALUK: *Zbornik avstralskih Slovencev 1985*, *Zbornik avstralskih Slovencev 1988* (Anthologies of Australian Slovenes, 1985, 1988), and *Lipa šumi med evkalipti* (The Lime-tree Rustles among the Eucalypti, 1990).

Pavla Gruden, along with her important work as editor, published a number of poems both in English and Slovene. Her poetic strength can especially be seen in her collection of haiku verse *Snubljenje duha* (Courting the Mind, 1994). She reveals herself as a subtle poet of this originally Japanese epigrammatic verse, which helps her to word her migrant experience in Australia (cf. Jurak 1997). Australia is no longer conceived as a foreign land but rather as a *terra felix*, which may offer migrants refuge, showing them the way out of the controversies of the modern world: »Milo Južni križ / pot kaže brodolomcem – Zemlja vsa navzkriž« (Gruden 1994: 53). Her contemplative stance and the *carpe diem* approach speak in favour of a harmony between nature and Man. Pavla Gruden's new book is about to be published in Slovenia.

From among the group of migrant poets, such as the interesting but little published poet Peter Košak (*Iskanje*, Search, 1982), Cilka Žagar, Vika Gajšek, Ivanka Škof, Marjan Štravs (*Pesmi iz pradavnine*, Poems from Ancient Times), Ivan Žigon, Danica Petrič, Ivan Lapuh, Ciril Setničar, Caroline Tomašič, Ivan Kobal, Draga Gelt, Marcela Bole, Rev Tone Gorjup and others, Jože Žohar deserves special note, for he belongs among the best Slovene poets in Australia. His collection of verse *Aurora Australis* (1990) was the first book by a Slovene migrant from Australia to be published in Slovenia, and it received for its thematic and stylistic experimentation and innovations a very positive critical response (Maver 1992). In 1995 he published his second collection in Slovenia, *Veku bukev* (To the Crying of Beeches), and he is currently preparing for publication his third collection *Obiranje limon* (Lemon-picking).

Žohar's verse is characterized by linguistic experimentation—using numerous palindromes, alliterations, sound colourings, as well as lexical and syntactic experimentation—for Žohar, as a migrant in a new English-speaking environment, is interested in testing the borders of Slovene poetic expression. In his last collection *Obiranje limon*, which still awaits publication, he thus introduces rhythmical prose and looks back on his life in Australia, metaphorically picking lemons, as he had previously picked apples (*Aurora Australis*) which eventually turned into sour wine (i.e. his life in Australia). He too accepts Australia as his new homeland, although he remains displaced and never 'trans-placed'. He sees his life as an endless process of saying good-bye and claims there is each time less of himself, whether departing from Australia or Slovenia; he tries to find inspiration, the Prodigal son, down under: »Tam kjer si, je junij zimski čas, ko limone, pomaranče dozoriijo, čas, ko vse zapustiš in te vsi zapustijo, ker za spremembo hočeš tako. Sam veš, da se tudi med limonami čutno napete pesmi godijo. Med njimi si najdi zavetje« (Žohar 2001).

As regards Slovene migrant poetry written in English and sometimes bilingually, the poetry and prose of Danijela Hliš comes first. She represents the first generation of migrants who write in English, with, for example, Michelle Leber and the deceased Irena Birsa as members of the second generation of Australians born to Slovene parents. These writers are no longer preoccupied with such typical migrant themes as nostalgia for home or the problems of migrants trying to establish themselves in a linguistically and culturally different environment, for they take as themes existential issues, urban impressions and the like, though tainted with the typical Slovene melancholy. Bilingualism fits into the framework of the Australian policy of multiculturalism and has thus changed conditions of literary creativity, especially since the 1980s (Maver 1999a). Hliš writes her sketches and poems mostly in the two languages. With her perfect command of English as a literary medium of expression, she is the first author of Slovene origin who has managed to enter Australian multicultural anthologies and even the secondary school reader for Australian state schools, with her bilingual verse collection *Whisper/Šepetanje* and the collection in English *Hideaway Serenade* (1996). Poems in the latter book show her migrant experience as essentially ambivalent: she describes the Slovenia she had left behind not only nostalgically but also bitterly, and, on the other hand, she seems to have accepted Australia as the new homeland with which she emotionally identifies not only in the poems but also in the short stories, essays and sketches.

As regards Slovene migrant fiction, a great number of short prose or documentary writings have appeared in Australia and Slovenia: Rev Bernard Ambrožič, Marijan Peršič (*Per Aspera ad Astra*, 2001), Draga Gelt, Stanka Gregorič, Danica Petrič, Ivanka Škof, Pavla Gruden, Danijela Hliš, Ivan Žigon, Lojze Košorok, Aleksandra Ceferin, and many others. From among the longer prose works, the book by Ivan Kobal written in English *Men Who Built the Snowy* (1982) appeared first, published later in the Slovene language as *Možje s Snowyja* (1993). This essentially memoiristic work is based on the author's personal experience of participating in the construction of the hydro-energy system in the Snowy Mountains during 1954–1958 in which many migrants participated, including Slovenes. The book is a documentary testimony about this project, which, according to Kobal, brought the migrants of various nationalities

together to work after the Second World War in a harmonious union to build the new Australia.

Cilka Žagar, currently in Slovenia, is probably the best known migrant fiction author, for two of her published novels were received very favourably: *Barbara* (1995) and *Magdalena med črnimi opali* (Magdalena among Black Opals, 2000). She is preparing to publish in Australia the book *Goodbye Riverbank*, describing the various life stories of Australian Aborigines that she knows well from her work and life among the opal seekers at Lightning Ridge. She wrote about the Aborigines also in the book *Growing Up in Walgett*, and in Slovene she is preparing the publication of the novel *Nevidne vezi* (Invisible Ties). Žagar's novel *Barbara*, written originally in English and then translated into Slovene, presents a chronicle of the Slovene migrant community in Australia, from the construction of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Scheme to the current problems of the community. Through the eyes of the protagonist Barbara and her family in the fictitious town of Linden, one receives insight into the sad and even cruel but also happy moments in the lives and times of Slovene migrants living under the Southern Cross. Her novel *Magdalena med črnimi opali* is about a split personality, the double ego of a single migrant person (Magda-Lena) and grows into a saga of a migrant family. While Magda takes care of the family, Lena looks back and tries to find ways to return to the past, when she was loved and when she herself loved and still nourished the hope of a better future. Magdalena, two aspects of a personality, dualistically set asunder between the search for the material and the spiritual aspect of life, constantly seeks a perfect love that would provide safety and spiritual meaning as opposed to material things.

Ivanka Sluga-Škof, along with the many previously published articles, in 1999 published a book of memoirs that range from her childhood in Slovenia to her life and cultural work among the Slovenes in Australia. From among the younger generation of writers Katarina Mahnič should definitely be mentioned, for she has for some years now been editing the journal *Misli* and has already received important recognition of her writing in Slovenia. In 2000 was also published a book by Ivan Lapuh, *Potok treh izvirov* (The Brook of Three Sources), containing mostly sketches, some poems and a few aphorisms. There are two more books that have to be mentioned in this regard, although they are written in English. *The Second Landing* by Victoria Zabukovec (1993), who is not of Slovene origin, is an historical, memoiristic and half-documentary book based on the life experience of her Slovene husband. Janko Majnik in his autobiographical memoir *Diary of a Submariner* (1996) describes his experience of the Second World War as a Yugoslav submariner, when he together with the crew, not wanting to be captured by the Germans, defected to the allies and via Egypt eventually migrated to Australia (Maver 1999b).

Considering the numerous (according to the bibliographical data of over a hundred published books collected by Milena Brgoč) and increasingly noteworthy literary works by Slovene migrants in Australia, at least two ideas for the future suggest themselves. Artistically, important works ought to be more adequately represented in the anthologies of the unified Slovene literature within the so-called common Slovene cultural space, a syntagm very rarely heard during the past years; and, second, literary critics and editors should try harder to publish and republish individual literary works,

especially if they were previously published in Australia with success. With the several better collections and books in prose published during the last years, the situation is improving, yet the status is far from satisfactory or confidence-inspiring.

In the present processes of globalization, all migrant literature is most valuable and should not be treated separately or ghettoized, certainly not for its geographical 'tyranny of distance' and even less so for its artistic merit, which in some instances is high indeed. This has been acknowledged also by 'emitive' nations much larger than Slovenia, with a considerable migrant body living abroad. Spiritual and physical dividedness in which many migrant authors have found themselves may even represent an advantage for artists, for, less burdened and with a greater critical (di)stance they can reflect the world around them, the new migrant environment, and also the world they left behind 'at home' in Slovenia. It is true, however, that their country of origin is also changing quickly and is no longer as it was when they left it. Slovene migrant writers translate reality in two different systems, which is why their work can be regarded an enrichment of both cultures, the source and the target: thus they emerge as 'transcultural' writers in the best sense of the word. Does the future culture of the newly settled countries such as the U.S.A., Canada, and Australia belong to the melting pot, mosaic or hybrid? To some kind of mixture definitely. The most recent critical cultural approach has introduced new concepts, in addition to the already established 'multiculturalism', such as 'polyvocality' and especially 'hybridity' (Bakhtin 1990). The latter has been extended by Homi Bhabha to examine also the relations of power within the 'colonial' situation, arguing that hybridity as a form of cultural difference allows the voice of the other (in our instance the migrant), the marginalised, and the dominated to exist within the language of the dominant group whose voice is never totally in control (Bhabha 1994).

All of these factors, among which artistic merit is beyond doubt of prime importance, speak in favour of including individual migrant works into the Slovene literary canon. They frequently transcend the thematization of the sheer Slovene migrant experience in Australia and adopt a cosmopolitan existential stance which addresses readers internationally, in Slovenia and abroad.

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