

LOUIS ADAMIC'S "OLD ALIEN" AS A RELIC OF ETHNIC DIFFERENTIATION IN THE U.S.A.

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Abstract

The paper analyzes Louis Adamic 1940 story "The Old Alien by the Kitchen Window" as the foil to his 1928 reportage "The Bohunks". The latter provoked a violent controversy among Slovene Americans due to its honest, straightforward and none-too-flattering presentation of the Slavic immigrants in America known as the Bohunks. "The Old Alien" story is both a portrait of an individual as well as a broader cultural and social analysis of Slovene American life.

The inconceivable complexity of America intrigued Louis Adamic¹ from the beginning of his literary career in the 1920s. "Basically, I suppose, I am a student who is his own teacher, a finder-out, one who is trying to get at the truth about things and making an effort to understand them." (Adamic 1938:). Exploring the ethnic diversity of the American society soon became one of his top priorities. He turned into an avid collector of immigrants' personal reminiscences regardless of their nationality. In 1938, for example, "he flooded both foreign and English language publications of all kinds with requests for information about immigrants and second and third generation Americans. He combed directories and registers in search of names and addresses to which he could send specialized questionnaires – "To Polish Americans", "To Jewish Americans" [...]" (Christian xxxi). Further, he distributed a broadside "Plymouth Rock and Ellis Island" among organizations and individuals and in 1939 conceived of a lengthy questionnaire "Let's Become Americanized – ALL OF US" with half of each page left blank for notes" (xxxii).

In the July, 1928 issue of *American Mercury*, Adamic published a "story" titled "The Bohunks". It was, in fact, a piece of mixed genre, "written in the form of a magazine report or reportage, fashionable in the twenties and thirties in the American monthly press, of which Adamic produced a great deal" (Dolenc 208). In the introduction to his rather provocative and not-too-pleasant portrait of the Slavic immigrant Adamic bluntly stated that "during the quarter of a century immediately preceding the World War, America received great hordes of Bohunks and made use of them" (Adamic 319).

¹ 1898-1951, Slovene-born American author (*Laughing in the Jungle* (1932), *The Native's Return* (1934), *From Many Lands* (1940), *A Nation of Nations* (1945), *The Eagle and the Roots* (1952), etc.)

In the last part of his text, he integrated the Bohunks in the large multitudes of other immigrants to the Promised Land saying that: "America lured them over by the million: she needed their hands even more than they needed her dollars, and made use of them. In her mines and mills she killed them by the hundreds, crushed their bodies, robbed them of their best human qualities, made them into machines, into slaves" (324).

Adamic proceeded to say that the immigrants brought with them much more than their brawn for they had plenty of spiritual energy. But America wanted only the first.

In 1940, he saw into print his new book titled *From Many Lands*. It was to become number one book of Adamic's Nation of Nations series². "His characters were *dramatized* from his acquaintances and investigations and in their separate episodes they touched nearly all of the "diversity" he had insisted should be understood in order to accomplish America's complete "unity"" (my emphasis, Christian xxxii). Adamic was a passionate adversary of the obsolete melting pot idea that forced aliens to melt with individuals of various nationalities and races into a new race (Crèvecoeur in Sol-lors 75-6). He sooner believed in "unity in diversity" stressing the enormous potential of the immigrant as well as his/her actual contribution to the overall well-being in the U.S. That was his answer to the "general prejudice and intolerance, of ignorance and fear" (Adamic in Christian xxxii).

From Many Lands won Adamic the John Anisfield Award as "the most significant book of 1940 on race relations in the contemporary world" (xxxii). The book is a collection of stories about immigrants of different national backgrounds including Adamic's native territory, Slovenia. "The Old Alien by the Kitchen Window" was first published in the July, 1940 issue of *Saturday Evening Post* to be included, a couple of months later, in the above mentioned book.

In his short fiction, Adamic seldom wrote about Slovene Americans. With the publication of "The Bohunks" in 1928 he triggered a violent storm of protest among Slovene Americans who found the piece defamatory. They accused its author of spitting venom on his fellow countrymen. The text was proclaimed unworthy of a writer of Adamic's magnitude. What was very strange, as Dolenc observed in 1981, was the fact that "the original English text of The Bohunks was read by very few Slovene Americans, partly because it was published in a magazine unfamiliar to them, but chiefly because at that time very few of them read or understood English" (207). As the first Slovene translation appeared only in 1979, this means that the whole uproar evolved from the biased opinions of the few people who did indeed read the text.

When Adamic published his story 12 years later about the Slovenian "alien", he averted his eyes from the general aspects of the phenomenon called "the Bohunks" and instead chose to focus on an individual in order to portray a fellow countryman born some 20 kilometers to the south of Adamic's own birthplace. It appears that Adamic realized the counterproductiveness of a (predominantly) negative approach such as applied in "The Bohunks" was counterproductive if the text were to promote the idea of multiculturalism. In order to convince xenophobic fellow Americans of the value of his alien character, Adamic must have realized he needed to draw a positive portrait, a likeable though nonetheless deeply human individual. Anton Kmet, or Tone for short,

² Other books in the series include *Two-Way Passage* (1941), *What's Your Name* (1942) and *A Nation of Nations* (1945).

the protagonist of “The Old Alien by the Kitchen Window” fulfills the above conditions perfectly.

In my paper, I will examine “The Old Alien by the Kitchen Window”, the text that offers, on one hand, an individualized portrait of an elderly Slovene immigrant, whereas on the other it exploits some broader aspects of the protagonist’s life as a source of cultural and historical analysis. It is my belief that with this story Adamic wished to achieve at least two goals: 1. to ward off alien haters by proving them wrong and 2. demonstrate his ability as writer capable of writing a good story with an interesting plot, plausible characters, universal theme, etc. The lapsing from past to present and back, the skillful creation of suspense, the satire embedded in humor as well as maneuvering between Standard English and Slovene American speech are proof enough that Adamic’s literary ambitions may have given way to other interests in the politically overloaded 1940s but were not altogether dead either.

The “alien” of the title is a Slovene immigrant who is well past his prime, being eighty years old. His special status as “the alien” can be understood in two ways: according to *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, an alien means “(a) belonging to a different country, race, or group, usually one you do not like or are frightened of” (39), and “(b) someone who is not a legal citizen of the country in which they live” (*Ibid.*). As we will see, both definitions apply to our hero.

The story is quite long and was, to facilitate reading and understanding, subdivided into ten untitled units, or parts, marked simply with Roman figures. Part I introduces the protagonist Anton – Tone – Kmet, fondly referred to as “Oché Tone” (Father Tone) by family and friends. Having worked all his active life for the American Steel and Wire Company in Cleveland, Ohio, Oché Tone has been retired since the age of fifty-five, a distinguished record of which he is mighty proud. The old man is a native of the village of Ajdovec near Žužemberk in Dolenjsko (in his time the area was called Lower Carniola). He married a Slovene immigrant woman from a village not far away from his own and they have had eleven children of whom ten are still alive.

Although he loved his job and the company he worked for, he nevertheless came home from work one day deciding “that he had done his bit in the world and sat down /.../ by the kitchen window to gaze out and smoke and think from daybreak until nightfall every day of the week, week after week, month upon month, year in and year out; and to wait for his pension check, which the postman brings him once in a month without fail” (Adamic 1940: 147). He is not a citizen of the United States and does not speak English.

Part II of Adamic’s story seeks to explain Tone Kmet’s life prior to emigration - his being the underprivileged second son of a peasant as well as Emperor Franz Jozef’s soldier for a number of years. His transatlantic passage ended in New York whereupon he proceeded by train to Cleveland, where he ended up in a boarding house located in the midst of a vivid Slovene American community. Tall, strong and healthy, he acquired a job the very next day and soon proved he could do the work of three people. His effort did not go unnoticed and secured him a privileged status within the company: his wages were better than his colleagues’ and he was duly promoted to even better-paying and less dangerous posts as he grew older.

In Parts III and IV the reader learns about Tone Kmet's marriage and his first home in America. The lucky streak was interrupted by a self-provoked accident at workplace. Kmet was laid up for months but nevertheless continued to receive his wages, much to his wonder, just as if he were working. After that, Kmet's loyalty for the company that employed him was unwavering. In the end, twenty-five years of continuous employment without ever being involved in a strike made him eligible for pension at the early age of 55.

Part V dwells on Tone Kmet's "property instinct". He started pursuing it as his family increased with the birth of each new child. He bought a small house first and then, thanks to smart land speculation, a bigger and better one. That was the place Adamic visited back in 1940. During the first twenty years of their marriage, Tone and Karolina Kmet were blessed with 11 children, three boys and eight girls. All children, except one, survived and reached adulthood. Only the oldest son, Anthony, died as a consequence of his World War I experience. The narrator then proceeds to list, in chronological order of their birth, the Kmet children, their marital status and family circumstances, their careers and achievements. If a family has multiplied into its third generation, relevant data are provided as well.

Part VI is a story within the story. It explains Tone and Karolina Kmet's official alien status. Apart from clarifying one of the most crucial aspects in Tone Kmet's life, this story also represents a piece of Slovene cultural and social history of Cleveland at the turn of the century. Adamic explains how naturalization of most Slovene immigrants at the time was in the hands of a certain Mr Boston, a fellow countryman, who sent people to night school and saw to it that everybody got their citizenship. In return, the people were expected to behave themselves during election time and vote for the candidate selected by Mr Boston. Simple, honest Kmet refused to cooperate in the game thus forfeiting his Americanization.

Part VII tells about Kmet's decision to retire at the age of 55. "Why should he work any more? He had done enough, hadn't he?/.../ In a way, he was tired of that, bored with it. And he was generally tired. *Zmatran*. Funny, how weary his legs felt" (158). Worried about his health, the protagonist came to the conclusion it would be best for him to sit down and take things easy. Blessed with healthy Old World skepticism he "decided to retire in part also to test this pension plan" (Ibid.). To his infinite surprise it worked.

Part VIII begins with, "More than nine-tenths of the daytime in the last quarter of the century he has spent in that chair by the kitchen window. He never gets tired sitting there" (160). The day Adamic-the narrator visited him, the man sat there wearing "a pair of pants he has had since 1921" (Ibid.) and a ten-year-old sweater. This is the most humorous part of the story. Adamic's humor is mild and circumstantial, and occasionally it advances into satire. "[N]ow his aim is to make a good job of idleness. He has made it a good job from the start" (Ibid.). The elderly protagonist has chosen not to bother himself about matters that are of no direct consequences to him: he has not yet seen the newly painted house from the outside nor has he been upstairs for 22 years. The old man's list of idiosyncrasies is long, including his enthusiasm for football even if he does not know the rules of the game.

The penultimate part documents the toughest moment in the life of the Kmetts, their oldest son's death. Later on Karolina took ill and Tone himself lost his appetite,

which worried him a great deal. But they survived and regained their vitality. In part X Adamic lets the old man speak in order to let him give his point of view on the matter of being and remaining an alien.

The dividing line between literature and history as well as between literature and reporting has prompted an endless array of discussions, scholarly and other. There is no doubt that Adamic's story is a mixed genre, containing elements of all three: literature, history and reporting. If we take it that Adamic's imaginative gift was less pronounced – he did, after all, rely heavily on real-life stories – his power of expression was nevertheless amazing. Let us therefore examine his creation of Tone Kmet's character.

Speaking in strictly literary terms, characterization means “the way an author describes or shows what a character is like” (*Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* 244). In a short story the author reveals the characters of imaginary persons “so that they exist for the reader as real within the limits of the fiction” (Holman 75). For the most part Adamic's creation of Tone Kmet's character relies on the explicit method of characterization through direct exposition illustrated by action. The starting point, however, is that Tone Kmet was a real person whose literary portrait came into existence on the basis of written records (questionnaire) as well as Adamic's interviews with Tone Kmet and his close family. We may presume that the data thus acquired helped stretch Adamic's imagination to create an image of the old man that may or may not have corresponded to the reality. Adamic wished to make his protagonist as credible and lifelike as possible. The personal data listed within the first page of Adamic's story record not the dates but Tone Kmet's six recent anniversaries -- the eightieth of his birth, the fiftieth of his beginning to work for the American Steel and Wire Company, the forty-eighth of his marriage, the forty-seventh of the birth of the first of his eleven children and the twenty-fifth of his retirement on a monthly pension. These numbers testify to the protagonist's fruitful though rather predictable (except for the early retirement) life story that could be duplicated in the lives of many other elderly (though not perhaps that old) Slovene Americans. However, the story was not written to be read by Slovene Americans alone. It was primarily written to be read by mainstream Americans and convince them of the worthiness of the character as an individual and as a representative of his group. That called for a likeable character and Tone Kmet seemed a perfect choice. In order to draw an accurate portrait, Adamic took over the role of the old man's interpreter. He acts self-consciously as a narrator but combines his role with that of a reporter both recounting the story and commenting on it. Tone Kmet hardly ever speaks; rather than this his words and thoughts are filtered through the narrator's consciousness and consequently rendered in the third person singular. Adamic justified his decision by saying that, “He [Tone Kmet] understands some English but does not speak it” (Adamic 1940: 148). Furthermore, focusing on Kmet's family genealogy, Adamic turned Kmet into a palpable, one-of-the-people hero, who is both true to life and also typical in a broader sense. Adamic discretely extrapolates general traits from Kmet's case. Between the lines, Adamic points to the Kmet family values such as industry, honesty, sincerity, integrity and loyalty, thus indirectly suggesting that these are typical Slovene family values just as they are typical American family values. The Kmet family functions as a single multigenerational entity. It has been a family tradition for men to become coremakers whereas the women mostly stayed at home looking after their families. They sought

employment outside their homes only when absolutely necessary and even then they were likely to work for one and the same company. In his presentation of the larger “Kmet clan”, Adamic carefully chose from among a number of things he could have written about in order to demonstrate (a) that the Kmetts as well as their children and spouses live in orderly circumstances, (b) that they are decent, hardworking and loyal people, and (c) that they all contribute to America’s well-being.

Tone Kmet is an ideal laborer – hard-working, submissive, loyal, in short, he possesses all the qualities cherished by purely American bosses. But he is also a pronounced individualist when it needs be, one who won’t surrender to the “herd impulse”, refusing to be brainwashed by a self-proclaimed Slovene American “leader” even if it means renouncing his citizenship. In this way Kmet demonstrates a high degree of personal integrity whereby honesty and firmness of moral principles outweigh the benefit of calling oneself American.

What makes Kmet’s character so compelling and lifelike are his individualistic traits, especially his little eccentricities. Adamic delights in dwelling upon his protagonist’s oddities such as his faithful listening to radio transmissions of football games despite his ignorance on the topic of the rules, “What thrills him is the excitement in the voice of the reporter” (161). Or his peculiar physical passivity that has, in the course of years, evolved into incredible “monumental” (Ibid.) existence. “Since his retirement, Oché Tone has not moved a finger to do anything apart from attending to some of his personal needs[...] To sit down was his peasant idea of taking a rest, of idling [...] Of late years he has been forced to do so, as his legs have become difficult to negotiate” (160). The protagonist’s list of oddities spreads out to his peculiar fondness for ancient items of clothing, his diet as well as inability to speak English, a trait not uncommon in first-generation immigrants. “He understands some English but does not speak it. His medium of expression is a Slovenian peasant dialect, but he uses many American-English words twisted into Slovene forms of his tongue. In his speech, for instance, a “house” is a *gauz*, “shoes” are *shukhi*, “street” is *shtrit*, and “beer” is *pi*” (148).

In Kmet’s stubborn refusal of becoming a naturalized citizen, Adamic saw “also an element of typical Slovenian peasant stubbornness and contrariness[...]” (157). His comment on Kmet’s disbelief in the American pension system demonstrates the mode of acceptance of “aliens” Adamic wished to spread among the non-alien population - humorously benevolent with reference to the possible shortcomings as well as appreciative in consideration of their positive contribution to the growth of America,

Carniolan skepticism, however, is a formidable thing, and Anton Kmet did not even yet quite believe the check was genuine. Maybe the mill bosses were playing a trick on him. They were great jokers [...] He studies it on each occasion. There is the name of the Fund; there is his name, always spelled correctly; and there is the amount, always the same. He notices the occasional change in the signatures at the bottom, and wonders – half seriously, half humorously – what has happened to the man who signed it before, whether he has died or quit or been discharged, for Oché Tone imagines that people even in such high and extraordinary places as the United States Steel and Carnegie Pension Fund have their troubles. (159)

In his published works and otherwise, Adamic frequently argued that alien xenophobia was deeply rooted in America. The WASPS perceived the immigrants as stupid, dirty, violent and misbehaved. Adamic's egalitarian tendencies were particularly valuable because he had been, ever since the publication of his Book-of-the-Month selection, *The Native's Return* (1934), in the position to make himself heard.

Last but not least, one cannot overlook the symbolism of the protagonist's name. The immigrant Tone Kmet escaped from the poverty of his native land just like millions of other Eastern Europeans at the turn of the century. As Steinberg formulates it in his book *The Ethnic Myth*, "Immigration began as a trickle, gradually gained momentum during the nineteenth century, and finally assumed the dimensions of a flood by the beginning of the twentieth century" (32). Tone Kmet, the second-born farmer's son, whose last name ironically means *peasant*, came with the flood having had no prospect at all of ever becoming a peasant in his impoverished native country. Keeping his eyes wide open though, he learned about the large demand for labor in the United States, took his chance and emigrated. In the end the ill-fated peasant swapped the fields for the factory at the time when "America needed the immigrant at least as much as the immigrant needed America" (37). Alien, inexperienced and forced by the circumstances to accept a backbreaking menial job he could easily have become one of the millions of the exploited laborers. But *nomen est omen* -- he was, after all, a *peasant*; the term evokes stamina, vitality, physical strength and stubbornness: all assets that paid off in the end. Whether semi-fictional or real, Tone Kmet's is a success story. It tells of a double victory -- the protagonist's contribution to the well-being of America and his personal achievement. It also tells of the small-scale American Dream come true whereby one of its principles, the principle of egalitarianism, is sadly missing. However, as long as the embodiment of the American dream is visible in the form of a regular monthly pension, the old alien does not care. For, as he says -- papers or no papers, he is nevertheless an American of sorts: "Look at him! They call him an American sparrow; what makes him American? Has he got his papers? Is he registered? Listen: back in Ajdovec, in lower Carniola, I saw sparrows which were no different.[...] A sparrow is a sparrow, a man is a man, al' né -- isn't that so?" (Adamic 1940: 164).

CONCLUSION

With "The Bohunks" Adamic "expressed some of the aspects of immigrant life and difficulties much more provocatively than those (authors, J.P.) before him" (Dolenc 218). Adamic's main idea was that the Bohunks only became "dung" upon their arrival in America once they had lost their human dignity in their struggle against the odds. Read today, "The Bohunks" "represents a Slovene American classic in English, in spite of the fact that it is compositionally far from perfect and glows artistically only in parts" (219). Compared with "The Bohunks", "The Old Alien by the Kitchen Window" presents itself as a mixture of semi-biographical reportage and literature. It reads easily, in parts entertainingly, and has a certain air of orality about it. The narrator is a reporter of sorts who knows his protagonist well from personal experience. His interest in the old alien is double: as an individual, a quaint relic of the past, as well as a representative

of his immigrant group. It is here that Adamic's story emerges as the foil to his earlier text. The immigrant life of Tone Kmet is neatly divided into two equal periods, each stretching across a quarter of a century. The protagonist's post-retirement era is a rich source of his individualistic traits whereas the time of his active life within the confines of the factory spotlights an entirely different man who is willing to work hard and do overtime when necessary, who is loyal to the company he works for, and who provides well and conscientiously for his rapidly increasing family.

Louis Adamic believed in the power of explanation: if only the immigrant problem were properly interpreted to those Americans with longer roots in the country, there would be no ground for xenophobia. He had a strong determination and plenty of enthusiasm when it came to bridging the yawning gap between the worlds of the immigrants and mainstream Americans. It is true that neither "The Bohunks" nor "The Old Alien by the Kitchen Window" contain "any particular new discoveries about the life of our or other Slavic immigrants in the United States" (Dolenc 218), but this is correct only if viewed from the perspective of Slovene Americans. Dolenc refers the reader to a number of other Slovene American authors (218) who in their literary works painted similarly bleak pictures of Slovene immigrant existence in the U.S. as Adamic in "The Bohunks"³ thereby suggesting that Adamic both borrowed the themes from other Slovene American authors as well as significantly influenced a number of others. His "old alien" story attempts to "explain" an alien group of people to the other half. According to Adamic, diversity in the U.S should be accepted as healthy and invigorating. Immigrants like Tone Kmet had to invent an identity for themselves which was hard enough. Why was it so difficult for them to qualify as Americans? Viewed from the present-day cosmopolitan perspective, Adamic started a battle that has been going on for decades. In the 1999 anthology *Growing Up Ethnic in America*, Jennifer Gillan writes in the introduction that, "[...]what constitutes American identity is far from settled. [...] [W]e all must "cross over" cultural, linguistic, and actual bridges in our attempts to embody an American identity" (x, xiii). Tone Kmet as an individual was a relic of old times and it may very well be that Adamic wanted to suggest that the old man's alien status equally belonged there – in the history.

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³ For a complete history of Slovene American literature see Jerneja Petrič, »Književnost slovenskih priseljencev in njihovih potomcev v ZDA 1891-1945«. Janja Žitnik and Helga Glušič, Eds. *Slovenska izseljenska književnost 2: ZDA*. Ljubljana, SAZU and Rokus, 1999. 89-264.

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