

FROM SLOVENIA TO AMERICA - THE FOOTSTEPS THROUGH TIME IN SLOVENIAN WOMEN'S AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

For the last two years, my work on the research project *The Role and Impact of Women in Preserving the Cultural Heritage among Slovenian Migrants* was to collect life stories of Slovenian women migrants and their female descendants in the United States. The main goal of the project is to highlight the woman's roles, efforts and achievements in preserving the Slovenian cultural heritage from the historical and contemporary perspective. When the research study was defined as an oral history project, the Slovenian women immigrants and their descendants have become the main source of definitions, interpretations and life's narratives. The study was never meant to include analysing any written materials, even though they present challenging goal worth another study because the presence of the Slovenian women writers in the numerous Slovenian-American magazines and newspapers has been very substantial in the past one hundred years.¹ However, when I came across auto/biographical books about the American immigrant experience written by women, I felt they certainly did belong to my area of research. I decided to find out how many there were and limited my search to the texts published in the book form in the United States or Slovenia. The books on the migration experience, edited or written by Slovenian women, are of great importance for to the scholars in the field of Slovenian migration studies as well as in literature and women studies. They also contribute the Slovenian experience to the rapidly growing literature on and by women immigrants in America, the process which started in the 1960s with the development of women studies and a new perspective on the immigration history of the United States.

In this paper I would like to present a few books with auto/biographical narratives by the Slovenian-American women immigrants. At this point, I can list the following: Marie Prislant, *From Slovenia - to America, Recollections and Collections*, published by the SWUA in Chicago, 1968; Mary Molek, *Immigrant Woman*, published by herself in Dover, Delaware, 1976; Irene M. Planinsek Odorizzi, *The Footsteps Through Time*, pub-

¹ Cf. Irena Milanič, "Slovene-American Women Writers and Poets in the 1930s: Between Literature and Social Engagement", *Dve domovini/Two Homelands* 17, 2003, pp. 61-65.

lished by her company Landmark Tours in Washington, 1978; Josephine Janezic, *Pepca's Struggle*, published by Vantage Press in New York, 1989; Mirella Besednjak, *Roža med trni*, *Moje življenje po koncu druge svetovne vojne*, published by Oko in Miren, 2001. The books by Ana Praček-Krasna, *Med dvema domovinama*, published by Založba Lipa in Koper, 1978, *Moja ameriška leta*, published also by Založba Lipa, 1980, and *Newyorški razglednik*, published by Prešernova družba in Ljubljana, 1991, are well known. They are collections of articles, poems and short stories published in different Slovenian newspapers and magazines in America over more than forty years. They are very informative in regards to the Slovenian communities in America, the depression era, the efforts to help Slovenia during the World War II, and they also cover some other socially and historically important issues. There are many autobiographical articles and elements in all of her books, though they are scattered as the author obviously never intended to write about herself at lengths.

1. "LONG LIVE AMERICA, WHERE WOMEN ARE FIRST!"

The first book by an immigrant woman was given to me as a present at the 75th anniversary celebration of the Slovenian Women Union of America in Joliet. It was *From Slovenia - to America* by Marie Prisland.² In the Preface, the author states that "the history of Slovenian immigrants is rapidly being forgotten, most of the early settlers are gone and their children are seeing their traditional background absorbed into the American way of life. These 'recollections and collections' have been compiled with deepest respect for the early settlers who contributed their efforts and talents to the strength of America and its Slovenian communities. It is for their children and grandchildren that I have prepared this collection of Slovenian history so that they might have a small glimpse of the rough road travelled by their parents and grandparents to improve their own living standard and to give life to sons and daughters in a free and happy land. Although the contents of this volume required a year of preparations, the book relates only a small portion of the life of the American-Slovenians. I do hope that it will serve as an incentive to a future historian who will apply the necessary efforts to cover this subject more completely." (Prisland 1968, p.13)

Judging by these words, one would think that there are not many autobiographical elements in this book. It includes the chapters like: History of the Slavs, Slovenia - the Beautiful, American-Slovenians and Their Activities, Slovenian Pioneers and Other Notables, Notable Newcomers Since World War II and Slovenian Communities. On the other hand, the author put a few autobiographical chapters like, Impressions of America, A Dream, Memories of Our Old Stove, literally among the other chapters.

² Marie Prisland came to the United States in 1906 as a fifteen years old girl. In 1926 she founded Slovenian Women Union of America and was its national president for twenty years. She was very active in many Slovenian American organizations and wrote for different newspapers and magazines.

We read in the *Impressions of America* a very interesting sociological interpretation of the impact that the American concepts of gender and class equality, work ethics or democracy had on the European newcomers including her. About the women social status, she wrote: "The honor and the freedom which American women were enjoying was a marvel to me. This is not duplicated in any other country on the globe. A few married men, however, were of a different opinion. Used to European behavior, they thought that America was over-protecting the little woman. One complained: 'In Europe a man could mishandle his wife and nobody bothered him, but here, if a man beats his wife a little and the neighbors hear her cry, they quickly call the police! The man is taken to jail for something he believed it was his right to do. Isn't the wife his property? And is he not free to do with it what he thinks is right?' " (p. 53)

We can only speculate if Marie Prislant might have wished to write an autobiographical book and why she didn't since the structure of the book is really unconventional: it does not include only the history of the Slovenians in America and of their homeland, and it is also not only an autobiographical text. Among the autobiographical parts, we read about the author's experience upon arrival in America in the chapter titled *Impressions of America*:

"A group of Slovenian immigrants, of which this writer was one, arrived in New York from that part of Austria, which presently is the territory of Yugoslavia. It was a beautiful morning in May 1906. After leaving the French ship *La Touraine*, we were transported to Ellis Island for landing and inspection. There we were 'sorted out' as to the country we came from and placed in a 'stall' with the letter 'A' above us ('A' was for Austria).

There were at least a hundred Slovenian immigrants. We separated ourselves, as was the custom at home - men on the right and women and children on the left. All of us were waiting to leave for all parts of the United States.

The day was warm and we were very thirsty. An English-speaking immigrant asked the near-by guard where we could get a drink of water. The guard withdrew and returned shortly with a pail of water, which he set before the group of women. Some men stepped forward quickly to have a drink, but the guard pushed them back saying: "Ladies first!" When the women learned what the guard had said, they were dumbfounded, for in Slovenia, as in all Europe, women always were second to men. Someone dramatically explained it this way: 'First comes man, then a long time nothing, then comes the woman.'

Happy at the sudden turn of events, one elderly lady stepped forward, holding a dipper of water, and proposed this toast:

'Živjo Amerika, kjer so ženske prve!
(Long live America, where women are first!)" (p.19)

It is easy to imagine that the Slovenian immigrants are not often mentioned in the vast literature on American immigration history and that the Slovenian women

immigrants are paid even less attention. But a prominent scholar, Maxine Seller, used the above quotation at the beginning of the introduction to her influential book *Immigrant Women* (Seller 1994, p.1). After the quotation she adds: "For Priland, who later founded the Slovenian Women's Union of America and created a woman's magazine, *The Dawn*, the American dream became reality. Not all immigrant women were so fortunate. For many, life in the United States was bitter and the slogan, "ladies first", cruelly ironic. "Ladies" were first to be underpaid, unemployed, and abused". (p. 2)³

Marie Priland knew a lot about this cruelty irony and included some stories about the hardships of Slovenian women in her book. She quoted Albina Novak saying: "Those who pine for the 'good old days' never knew what they were or never remembered what life had in store for the poor immigrants who came to America in the early years of this century". (p.75) The difficult life of Slovenian immigrant women was also the reason why Marie Priland founded the Slovenian Women Union of America in 1926. The Union's main goal was to help the Slovenian women living in America financially, to assist them in education, citizenship and participation in civic affairs, and provide moral and sisterhood support.

2. "WORK, WORK, WORK AND MORE WORK..."

The hard and bitter life of the early Slovenian immigrant women in America is the subject of the two above mentioned books, *Immigrant Woman* by Mary Molek⁴ and *The Footsteps through Time* by Irene Planinsek Odorizzi⁵. In both books the women's hardships painted in painfully vivid colours, but apart from this similarity the two books are very different.

The Immigrant Woman is a fictionalized biography of Mary Molek's mother - the an immigrant woman at the beginning of the twentieth century, who led an extremely poor but nevertheless uncompromisingly principled and proud life. "The Immigrant Woman was a seamstress-tailor; she sloped the pigs; she canned - everything (no instruction; no botulism); she weeded; she rushed her children into the cyclone cellar in the middle of the night; she gathered the eggs; she made butter; she built the fire in the kitchen stove; she washed out clothes and heavy overalls on a washboard in a tub, after soaking them all night; she wrung out the clothes by hand and pinned them on a clothesline to dry; and dashed out like an Olympic runner when a storm threatened

³ Maxine S. Seller, *Immigrant Women*, State University of New York Press, 1994. The quotation was later re-quoted by Donna Gabaccia, *From the other side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S.A., 1820-1990*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994, p. 111.

⁴ Mary Molek was born to Slovenian parents in 1909 in Chicopee, Kansas and became a writer who published extensively in several Slovenian American periodicals. She translated the work and autobiography of her husband, Ivan Molek, in Slovenian.

⁵ Irene Planinsek Odorizzi was born in Joliet, Ohio and was very active as a national heritage director of the Slovenian Women's Union of America for decades. She wrote many articles titled *The Immigrant* for the monthly publication of SWUA, *The Dawn*.

and they would get wet; she combed her children's hair, and made all their clothes - even their coats; she made her own soap; she ground corn into meal so coarse that you choked on it. A hand-iron for clothes; a kerosene lamp until the late twenties. She never saw a 'picture show'. She never had a radio; not even a telephone. (...) She never, never joined her family at the table for meals. 'There it is; I've got to go out'. Scores upon scores of chores yet to be done". (Molek 1976, pp. 19-20)

In the Introduction, Mary Molek describes the biographical text as "not sequential; not orderly, nor logical, nor predictable, nor kind, nor exculpatory. A patchwork quilt. Fragments floating into the mind's eye, sometimes like discrete scraps of material, sometimes stitched together". (p. 3)⁶ It is a poetic "quilt", a texture rich with the two stories that are told by the author simultaneously: about her mother and herself; about her mother's struggle to survive and live according to her values and norms and her daughter as an object of this goal; about her watching these values and norms slowly becoming her own. Mary Molek had written and published since she was in her twentieth, but wrote the *Immigrant Woman* late in her life as her last book. This is a very intimate book, which lacks any pathetic idealization of the mother or the family relationships but can easily make the reader cry. It is exceptional for its literary "patchwork" form as well as for the author's sincere dealing with topics such as the importance of having a male child, marital problems, or the shocking experience upon arrival in America, so different from that of Marie Prislend. Mary Molek quotes her mother saying: "If I had known, I'd never have come. Never left my homeland! The promises he made! The letters he wrote! The country I'd come to! I'd have everything! - This! This isn't what he promised me!" (p. 23)

The Footsteps through Time is a compilation of twenty-one stories as told or written by the narrators, Slovenian immigrants themselves, and edited by Irene Odorizzi. She dedicated the book to her mother who inspired her to write about the Slovenian heritage with these words: "She wouldn't let me forget her country and its customs. She taught me her language and told me stories of how it used to be in Slovenia. She made good things to eat like potica, strudel, home-made soup and klobase. She sang Slovenian melodies and showed me how to polka. She taught me my prayers and to love God; to look out for the future by saving and being thrifty. She taught me to be sensible, disciplined, unselfish and to work hard. She taught me to respect things and people; to treasure and appreciate even the little things in life. She passed on me the ideals, strengths, and hospitality of the Slovenian people. Together we visited Slovenia and I walked in her footsteps as she did in her youth. I feel so much a part of her - more and more as each day passes. She is my link to the past and my footsteps into the future. She will remain with me closely and lovingly until I die. She is a great woman! (Odorizzi 1978, p. xi)

The majority of the narrators, nineteen out of twenty one, were Slovenian immi-

⁶ More on the author and this book in, Irena Milanič, "Mary Jugg Molek - An American Writer and Poet with Slovene Roots", *Dve domovini/Two Homelands* 10, 1999, pp. 79-112.

grant women who had arrived in America with the first immigration wave. When they recounted their life stories they were all old. The narratives include factual descriptions of life, some very simple and short, others quite long, detailed and structured. They are enriched with maps and photographic material like family and wedding pictures. Common to them all is the hard everyday life; which, after decades of tiring work, brings a better life to them and to their children. As Mitzi from Jesenice describes those first decades: "I think that I remember those days the most because they were the busiest and the hardest ones. We put so much of our bodies and souls into living, that the memory of these early days could never be forgotten. Every day was work, work, and more work. Never vacation and very little sleep. (...) When I look back now, I wonder how we immigrants ever managed in those early days. Then I realize that we were able to suffer those hardships because we knew we had to stay. There was no future for us back home, only here in America." (pp. 33-34)

In her introductory note, Odorizzi does not explain her method therefore we do not know exactly how the stories were collected and who actually wrote or rewrote them. She tries instead to answer Mitzi's question, why the immigrants survived in such difficult circumstances. Provides many reasons, among them the sense of pride and dignity. "The immigrant did not accept defeat, no matter what obstacles he encountered; he persevered. He knew there was no one to depend upon but himself. If it was necessary to travel elsewhere to secure employment, he did so, taking his family with him. There is a saying which fits the immigrant perfectly, 'Work as if everything depended upon you; Pray as if everything depended upon God.' Faith and trust in God were inherent in these basically religious oriented people. Prayer gave them an inner strength to survive the hardships of day to day living.

The immigrant respected his countrymen and assisted with a helping hand whenever possible. There was a nationality bond and a kinship fostered by the culture of the old country. When they were with their own, everyone was a friend.

If our country is today the most prosperous nation of the earth, it is in no small measure due to the large natural resources – people of all races who have been able to live in peace. Each nationality group has contributed something of value to our economic life: Many groups and many individuals have been free to make distinctive contributions to our society." (1978, iv-v)

Mary Molek introduction is very different. She not only explains why she wrote the book the way she did, her praise for America as a "promised land" is scarce, her views critical, harsh even.⁷ She describes the early Slovenian immigrant women and the life that awaited them as follows:

These young women were not 'the tired, the poor' proverbially greeted with open arms by the Statue of Liberty. Neither were they descendants of uncultured, uncivilized

⁷ The extensively used synonym for the United States – "the promised land", was taken from the title of the book, written by an early east european woman immigrant to America, Mary Antin. She wrote about her experience and praised her new homeland in the classic success story, *The Promised Land*, published in Boston in 1912.

lands. They were, instead, bearers of an already-established cultural heritage, centuries old...

Their composite efforts, dedication to work, indefatigable physical and mental labors, resourcefulness, self-pride, and aspirations toward nobler human potential and dignified activities helped to weave the fabric for the affluence that was to be. Not that this affluence necessarily derived to them; they were frequently prime targets for exploitation. In this respect they fared even worse than the Blacks in times of slavery. For, unlike the latter, these twentieth century immigrant women - and men - were indirectly and helplessly 'bound hand and foot' in the circumstances of the labor and economic structure they had fallen into, and they were not provided with either food, shelter, or physical care. Neither were they free in any modern sense. Although no money was exchanged in buying their bodies, the fact that steamship agents banded them on ships and transported them to America made the newcomers as thoroughly bought as anyone in direct exchange for money." (Molek 1976, p. 5)

3. THE HAPPY END

If the three mentioned books deal with the women's experiences from the first wave of Slovenian immigrants who came to the United States before the Second World War, the last two portray two individual stories from the period after 1945 from the second immigration wave. The two books, *Pepca's Struggle* by Josephine Janezic⁸ and *Roža med trni* by Mirella Besednjak⁹ are true autobiographies, again similar and very different at the same time. Both authors spent their childhood in the region of Slovenia which had become an Italian territory after 1919 and suffered the Italian oppression, starvation, fear of the World War II, and the harsh, insecure years in the post-war Slovenia. Both young and longing for a better life, they escaped to Italy, one from Postojna and the other from Miren, and spent a couple of years in the Italian refugee camps. Here, the lives of two young Slovenian women turned in different directions.

Mirella Besednjak got married and gave birth to two boys in the camp before the family was sent to Cleveland in the United States. *Roža med trni*, published recently in Slovenia, is a simple and emotional description of extremely difficult life in America, which resembles the stories of the first women immigrants. Not knowing the language, being robbed in New York upon arrival, with no education, having a growing family and a husband injured by hard work, the life story of Mirella Besednjak is an example of an extraordinary struggle to survive in the "promised land", which lasted for thirty years. Eventually, the hard work and determination did bring a better life for parents

⁸ Josephine Janezic was born in Postojna in 1936, escaped to Italy after the end of the World War II and was sent to Australia after a couple of years spent in the refugee camps. She met her husband there and they moved to the United States in 1960.

⁹ Mirella Besednjak was born in 1932 in Gorizia, escaped to Italy after the end of the World War II and spent five years in the refugee camp before she and her family were sent to the United States.

and their children. Nevertheless, the author could never overcome the painful homesickness. She included in the book a lot of extensive and loving descriptions of her family life in Slovenia before and after the war as well as their recent reunions. In one of the many passages, she wrote: "Ko sta bila otroka v šoli in sem bila sama doma, sem sedela v tišini in pisala. Večkrat sem pogledala skozi okno v nebo in si zaželela, da bi bila ptica. Poletela bi domov k staršem in se jim potožila. Tam pa nisem imela nikogar. Noben človek na svetu ne more razumeti, kako je stran od doma, dokler tega ne doživi. Ljubila sem svoje otroke in moža, vendar ko me je prijela žalost, bi pustila vse in odšla. Nisem mogla razumeti, koliko mora človek potrpeti. Pa pravijo, da je tako lepo v Ameriki.... (Besednjak 2002, p. 61)¹⁰

The author of *Pepca's Struggle*, Josephine Janezic, is presented on the cover of her book as "going through the pressures of war, fighting for survival under communism, fleeing to Italy while under age, living in refugee camp in Italy, and going on to Australia, she got married and in 1960 moved to the United States". The book actually ends with her marriage and the couple's decision to move to the United States as soon as possible. I included this book on the list of the Slovenian American women immigrants' books because the author lives in America and wrote and published the book here. Though she writes mainly and in a very detailed way about her childhood and youth in Postojna, it is her escape to Italy after the World War II, her experiences in Australia and the decision to move to America that make it up as a very relevant reading. As far as I know this is the only book by a woman that deals with the experience of the after World War II immigrants or displaced persons with a very clear political and ideological message. The author dedicated the book "to many young and old Slovenians, to my grandparents, aunts, uncles and friends who, during World War II lost their lives for religious, national, and economic freedoms that had been promised to all, but were never granted under the communist regime.

The indomitable will of the people at that time should be an inspiration to the generations yet to come, especially to the youngsters, to whom this volume is dedicated". (Janezic 1989)

A very detailed description of the every-day life in her village, schooling under the Italian regime, the cruelty of partisans, bombardments during the war, and her adolescent problems; fill up the first half of the book concluded with a special Chapter on the History of Slovenia.

"However, all through history, we Slovenes have survived all tyrants and have miraculously always risen from the ashes. Before closing the chapter, I would like to point out that the part of the Slovenian territory where I grew up (under Italian rule

¹⁰ »When the kids were in school and I was alone at home, I sat in the silence and wrote. I often looked out through the window and to the sky and wished I could be a bird. I would fly home to my parents and tell them of my sorrows. But there, I had nobody. No one in this world can understand how it feels to be so far away from home unless you experience it. I loved my kids and my husband, yet when this sadness overcame me I could have dropped everything and left. I could not understand how one had to put up with so much. And they say how nice it is in America...«

from 1919) was, in 1945, occupied by Tito's armies. In February 1947, due to the peace treaty in Paris, the territory was annexed to Yugoslavia (except for the free territory of Trieste, which was given to Italy by the Western Allies in 1954).

In this way our family and the rest of the Slovenes of that territory passed from the Fascist regime through the difficult war time and landed under the Communist regime". (p. 141)

As I mentioned, at the refugee camp in Italy, Josephine Janezic chose a very different path from Mirella Besednjak. Her life in the camp is described in the second part of the book and offers an interesting woman's perspective of the choices, no matter how limited, that existed there. Soon after Josephine Janezic arrived to the camp, she set up a small "business" of repairing nylon stockings and was nick-named by the grateful customers as a "stocking repair girl". She gratefully attended a school organized by the Red Cross. There she learned Home Economics, English, and Domestic Work, "such as preparing meals, cooking, table-setting, and serving, etiquette, cake decorating, needlepoint, and sewing". (p.180) In the third part of the book we get to know how this acquired knowledge and proud determination helped Josephine Janezic in her temporary homeland, Australia, to get good though demanding jobs, and loyal friends. The end of the book is a happy one. In the Epilogue, the author describes her own and her husband's beautiful journey from Australia to America by ship, where they spent thirty days of elegant living and arrived in San Francisco in spring 1960. "In 1966", the author concludes, "our dream came true: we became citizens of the United States". (p. 280)

CONCLUSION

In a bibliography on immigrant women in the United States by Donna Gabaccia¹¹, she listed two books. Under the section of "Biography" we find Mary Molek's *Immigrant Woman*, which is described as a fictionalized biography of her mother. I checked this *Bibliography* when I already finished the writing of the text and it was interesting to see Marie Prislant's book listed in the section "Autobiography" with the following description: "Includes considerable information on community work and notable women, but also her autobiography". (Gabaccia 1989, p. 243) The reason, why *Pepca's Struggle* is not included is obvious as it was published the same year as the *Bibliography*. Why *The Footsteps through Time* is not included we could only guess. Nevertheless, in the ever growing literature on the women's immigrant experience in the United States there is a visible trace made by the auto/biographical books of Slovenian (American) women immigrants and their descendants. As modest as this trace is, it is undoubtedly noticeable and indelible.

¹¹ Donna Gabaccia, *Immigrant Women in the United States: A Selectively Annotated Multi-Disciplinary Bibliography*, New York, Greenwood, 1989.

POVZETEK

IZ SLOVENIJE V AMERIKO - STOPINJE SKOZI ČAS V AVTOBIOGRAFSKIH
DELIH SLOVENSKE AVTORIC

Mirjam Milharčič-Hladnik

Besedilo predstavlja nekatere avto/biografske knjige, ki so jih napisale slovenske izseljenke v Združene države Amerike ali njihove potomke. Knjige opisujejo izkušnje žensk iz prvega in drugega slovenskega imigrantskega vala in so pomemben vir za proučevalce migracijskih kot tudi ženskih in literarnih študijev. Hkrati predstavljajo slovenski prispevek v stalno naraščajočo zakladnico imigrantske literature v ZDA in so skromna, a nedvomno vidna sled med avto-biografskimi deli priseljenc v ZDA. Besedilo omeni bogat in vsestranski prispevek Ane Praček-Krasne, ki je v svojih knjigah obravnavala vse pomembne družbene vidike imigrantske izkušnje nasploh, posebej pa še ženske in svoje osebne, vendar se osredotoči na manj znana in dostopna dela. *From Slovenia to America*, avtorice Marie Prislant, opisuje slovensko zgodovino, delovanje slovenskih skupnosti v Združenih državah, posebej aktivne ženske in moške, vključuje pa tudi par avtobiografskih poglavij. *Immigrant Woman*, avtorice Mary Molek, je literarizirana biografija njene matere - imigrantke iz začetka 20. stoletja, ki je živela izjemno revno, a kljub temu brezkompromisno načelno in ponosno življenje. Irene P. Odorizzi je uredila zbirko enaindvajsetih zgodb z naslovom, *The Footsteps through Time*. Večina pripovedovalcev, devetnajst od enaindvajsetih, je bilo slovenskih imigrantk, ki so prišle v Ameriko s prvim imigrantskim valom in so pripovedovale zgodbe o težavnem in težkem delu. Mirella Besednjak je opisala svoje imigrantsko življenje po drugi svetovni vojni v knjigi *Roža med trni*, pred kratkim izdani v Sloveniji. Iz istega obdobja in drugega imigrantskega vala je tudi zanimiva izkušnja, ki jo je v knjigi *Pepca's Struggle* opisala Josephine Janezic.

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