

**SLOVENIAN CULTURAL ASSOCIATION
SIMON GREGORIČIČ, TORONTO, ONT., CANADA,
CELEBRATES ITS 30TH ANNIVERSARY**

Milica Trebše-Štolfa

*God bless you, my homeland
God be with you, my alpine blossom
May the Heavenly Guide lead you
I will never forget you!*

These lines from Gregorčič's poetry are engraved in black granite on the pedestal of his statue. The statue was created by sculptor Zdenko Kalin from Ljubljana and unveiled on June 22, 1975, at the »Simon Gregorčič« farm on the outskirts of Toronto. It is probably the most beautiful monument ever set up beyond our borders dedicated to a Slovene patriot. The Slovenes from the Primorska region in the *Slovene Cultural Association* are well aware of this. All their cultural events express love for their homelands on both sides of the ocean.

This fall thirty years have passed since the founding of the SCA. At that time it was called the »Primorska Club«. During the celebrations over the year, many have thought of the past when they were still very new arrivals and were looking for friends, trying to hear a familiar word, a familiar sound, and maybe even find a place where people danced as they used to dance at home. They were all so young then.

Canadian policy isn't oriented toward melting immigrant cultures into a single blend. It allows all the people to gather into their own cultural societies and encourages activities which preserve their national and cultural characteristics. And this is the real ethnic mosaic which is the greatest treasure of Canadian society. Canada has come to know that incoming peoples with all the differences in their cultures can only enrich the country. Canadians are sure that it is possible to be a loyal Canadian and at the same time keep their ethnic identity. And our people and their associations just prove it.

The cultural, hunting, sports, church and other clubs which began to develop in the new environment form a bridge between the native land and the New World, as well as forming connections between different generations of immigrants to Canada. With festivals of folk songs and folk dances they tear down the walls between different cultures and different nations.

The first steps for the Slovenes from the Primorska region were not very easy. They had to make a living and the work available was largely manual labour. To these economic difficulties emotional strains were added. The people from Primorska were not well received by the already established ethnic Slovene community. The difficulties occurred in the first years after World War II when young people were looking for a better life and emigrated through still-closed state borders. They had a different vision of the future, different experiences, and different goals. This post-war wave of immigrants found themselves, especially in the Toronto region, caught between the activities of the Parish of Mary Our Help on one side and the activities of the emigrant political association on the other. That's why in the fifties, the cultural associations started to flourish. In the Toronto region the »Simon Gregorčič« club formed by people from Primorska and the »Večerni zvon« club by people from Prekmurje were the most active. Slovenes also gathered in other Canadian towns and cities as well, especially where mining, farming, and the steel industry were centered. These cultural clubs wanted to preserve their own cultural character, so they incorporated statements of non-involvement in church and political affairs in their club charters. The »Simon Gregorčič« club was established on this basis as well.

The beginning of the club goes back to 1959 when Ciril Smrdelj, Rajko Furlan, Jože Jaksetič, Darko Lovišček, his cousin Ciril Masera who now lives in the States, Valdi Kavčič, and Jožef Zuzzi decided to call together like-minded people and establish an association of Slovenes from Primorska. The idea spread rapidly. On September 29, 1959, they had thirty-four members signed up, enough according to Canadian criteria to hold a formal founding meeting. When the meeting took place, sixty Slovenes were present. The founders were elected to the

first council which led the association until the following year's annual meeting. During this time they had to prepare both the constitution and a program of cultural activities for the club. Ivo Božič and Štefan Leban were also elected to the council.

On this foundation the club's successful thirty years of work has been built. The leadership changed every year at the annual meeting, but the presidents usually came from the Soča region, the Vipava Valley, or the surroundings of Ilirska Bistrica. So far the elected presidents have been:

- Ciril Smrdelj (1959-1963)
- Ludvik A. Stegu (1963-1967)
- Kristian Hlad (1968-1969)
- Viktor Grlj (1970)
- Frank Boštjančič (1971)
- Frank Tomšič (1972-1973)
- Štefan Humar (1975)
- Metod Serazin (1976-1979; 1987-1988)
- Jože Kanalec (1974; 1980-1986; 1989)

Most of the time the president is the overall coordinator of the club's activity. The members of the council are directly involved in club projects and activities agreed upon at the annual meeting. Every year seven to fifteen members of the council are elected. The number depends on the number of projects undertaken for a given year.

According to the constitution, the council consists of the president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, farm manager, and the members in charge of cultural programs, sports events, and other activities or special projects for the year. The treasurer's work is examined by an accountant who reports to the council. All the work of association is open for public inspection, and the members of the council are elected by secret ballot.

The number of members has varied through the years. It has not been less than 150 and not more than 300. It would be unrealistic to expect that all members would always agree on all club projects, and the projects have always been the main reason for joining or leaving the club. Most of the time, people have been eager to discuss everything about the events going on, about expanding the club's property, about mutual assistance and assistance to others...

In all these spheres, the »Simon Gregorčič« association has to be proud of its thirty years of work. Not all the activities were continuous, but most important were the relationships among the members who helped each other more easily overcome their homesickness and become familiar with the way of life in their new country.

The beginning of the club's life was in organizing social and cultural events. The Slovene language was the most missed food in the new country, so the theatre group formed at the very start soon presented the Fran Lipah comedy *Glavni dobitek* (*The Grand Prize*). The actors were Ludvik A. Stegu, Francka and Jože Seljak, Franc Batista, Milan Pahor, Marija Grlj, Ivanka Skrt, Dora Tomšič, Franc Gamze, Jožica Božič, and

SLOVENSKO PROSVETNO DRUŠTVO

SIMON GREGORČIČ

VAS VABI NA

PROSLAVO

1959 – 1989

30 OBLETNICE

USTANOVITVE DRUŠTVA

NA

GREGORČIČEV DAN

V NEDELJO

25. JUNIJA, 1989

NA DRUŠTVENEM ZEMLJIŠČU, (9. CESTA) HWY. #9

5 KM VZHODNO OD HWY. 400

Vabilo (iz knjige
Milice Trebše-Štolfa,
SPD Simon Gregorčič
1959-1989)

Slavko Šušteršič. The play was directed by Vilko Čekuta and was very well received by everyone. The audience was also enthusiastic about the first performance of the new »Simon Gregorčič« Choir, which later gave many concerts of Slovene folk and composed melodies. For two years, their conductor was Justina Grison from Trieste, who was a concert soloist and music professor as well. Unfortunately, the choir disbanded in 1962 when she left for Italy. Even with many efforts, the almost forty singers were unable to get another conductor, and many years passed until 1975 when Ignac Križman led the choir at the unveiling of the Simon Gregorčič monument. In the meantime four of the choir's members started to sing with the *Primorski fantje* group. The group still exists and gives performances by themselves or as part of the larger group *Fantje na vasi*. The theatre group disbanded as well, and there were no performances until the dynamic and hard-working Francka Seljak began to work systematically with the children of club members. She directed them during summer camp in a very diverse cultural program which included singing, dancing, and other activities which parents and others on the farm just loved. Having been a teacher in Yugoslavia, she taught the children basic Slovene grammar as well.

The first performance given by the adults took place on April 24, 1988, when Mrs. Seljak brought the theatre group of the Lipa Park Slovene National Club from St. Catharines. She directed the group's performance on the drama *Razvalina življenja (Ruin of a Life)* by F. S. Finžgar.

The late sixties and the beginning of the seventies were very rich in cultural events. Some short films on Slovenia were sent by Slovenska izseljenska matica and Slovene-Canadians got some feature-length Slovene films such as *Samorastniki (Self-made Men)*. The films were shown many times. The club also invited some outstanding friends - doctors, historians, and others - to lecture the members of the club on history, preventive medicine, and other topics.

For all these activities there had to be enough room. Since they didn't have their own property yet, they were guests at the centres of various other clubs. But April 1, 1964, is a date that will always remain in the memory of »Simon Gregorčič«

members. On this day they took possession of twenty-two acres of land situated in a very picturesque area of King Township not far from Toronto. Many volunteer working days were necessary to make this farm look Slovene. At first they merely held picnics in the open air, had summer vacations in tents and trailers on the farm, and organized sport activities, especially »balinanje«, the bowling game so popular at home. All that was missing at first was Slovene cooking. Great efforts to satisfy the members were made by Vida Grlj, Ivanka Šajn, and Lojzka Štefančič. Since they had no kitchen on the farm at first, they prepared food literally »under an umbrella«. Although the Slovene farm became very well known for its delicious food in the open air, it was many years before they »got a roof above their kitchen dishes«. They eventually built a small kitchen and got a lot of pleasure from it.

Every year they added something to the farm because they wanted to make their piece of land more pleasant. At first they had two pitches for »balinanje«, and the following year added two more. They built washrooms, a swimming pool for adults, and a wading pool for children. They built a volleyball court and a soccer field. But most of all they needed a meeting hall. They had many discussion on how to do it and where to build it, but they knew they had to have their own. Everyone agreed with the decision to build the hall on the farm and change their »gostilna v grmovju« (»pub in the bushes«) into a real one, since in Canada it is forbidden to sell alcohol in the open air or indoors without a license. When the hall was finished, they enjoyed their Christmas and New Year's Eve in their own place.

But very soon the kitchen became too small, so the members started to think of building a new one and very soon afterwards of building a bigger hall as well. The floor in the new hall can be used for »balinanje« in winter. Very recently they installed a central heating system. The farm has its own well. They have rebuilt the gate to the farm several times, improved the driveway to the hall, and built a large outdoor stage. Performances of all kinds take place here and dances too. On Gregorčič Day, which has been celebrated since 1976 on the Sunday closest to the 24th of June, folk dance and

singing groups appear, and a Mass is given from the new stage.

In the middle of this beautiful landscape is the statue of Simon Gregorčič. The site of the statue is very well kept. Members often come to the statue and think of the homeland and plan for the future. They are very proud of this place, and they bring every new visitor to the farm to this place first. The dedication ceremony was very well organized, and many dignitaries were present. On this occasion the only issue of the club newsletter **Društveni vestnik** came out. The editor was the club secretary, well known journalist Ivan Dolenc. It is too bad the newsletter had so short a history.

All year round and especially in the summer, »balinanje« tournaments are held. In 1983 an inter-club league was formed, including six Slovene clubs from southern Ontario. Because of its very well kept pitches, the CBA has asked »Simon Gregorčič« to organize the tournament for its Canadian Cup. »Simon Gregorčič« organizes its own tournament for men and women and mixed pairs as well. The members of the »Gregorčič« club get outstanding results in singles, pairs, and team competitions. It is unfortunate that the other members of the league haven't formed women's teams since the women of »Simon Gregorčič« can compete very well with anyone. For all the successes of the sport program, credit goes to Ivan Jagodnik and his colleagues.

Besides the »balinanje« tournaments, soccer matches between the »Fatties« and »Skinnyies« were held for several years during the seventies. Members had a lot of fun and a lot of recreation. They had two junior soccer teams and some volleyball tournaments as well. Unfortunately, not enough youth join the club activities now. The older members are becoming »lazy« and prefer to sit at a table and play cards, so they have even organized card tournaments.

Camping on the farm was an experience the children will never forget. In the seventies four summer camps were organized by Francka Seljak. The children spent pleasant hours in sport activities, and in the evenings they had campfires with stories and Slovene songs. They even learned to ride motorcycles, bicycles, and horses. In the winter youngsters organized skiing and sledding parties. At Christmas, Santa Claus always came to the farm.

»Simon Gregorčič« has friendly connections with other cultural clubs in Canada. Every year they host their fellow countrymen from other Canadian cities and from Cleveland and Pittsburgh. Groups from these clubs also participate in the cultural program. They quite often host folk dance and singing groups from Slovenia and the Slovene ethnic regions on its borders (Carinthia, Trieste, etc.) as well. In the late sixties and early seventies, they organized group charter flights to Slovenia during the summer. Unfortunately, in recent years very little cultural activity has taken place within the club itself.

Our Canadian fellow countrymen have very strong sympathy for anyone in need. They very quickly sent help for the victims of the 1963 earthquake in Skopje in Macedonia and again in 1975 collected a large amount of money for the victims of the Tolminska region earthquake. Every year they set aside some money for the Institute of the Holy Family in Gorizia (Italy) which takes care of Slovene orphans in that region. They were among the first to start collectioning money for an ultrasound probe machine for the Cancer Institute of the Ljubljana Medical Centre, and last but not least, they gave their share of money to reconstruct the birthplace of Simon Gregorčič in Vrsno near Kobarid which has been turned into a museum.

But certainly, most important to them is the statue of Simon Gregorčič on their farm, which they commissioned with their own money.

Probably not everything has been said which should be about these proud strong people and their work. At this anniversary of thirty years of their activity - many of them have been in the club from the beginning - we can all wish that for many years to come the Slovene songs, songs about our green Soča and red roses, will be sung in their new homeland and that for a long time to come they will feel their Slovene roots deep in their hearts.

POVZETEK

**SLOVENSKO KULTURNO DRUŠTVO SIMON GREGORČIČ
IZ TORONTA V KANADI
OBHAJA SVOJO TRIDESETLETNICO**
Milica Trebše - Štolfa

Začetki kulturnega društva slovenskih izseljencev iz Primorske v Kanadi segajo v obdobje po drugi svetovni vojni. Mladi izseljenci iz tega dela Slovenije, ki so v tujini iskali predvsem boljše ekonomske pogoje, so ustanovili svoja kulturna društva, da bi ohranili kulturni značaj ter delovali zunaj verskih in političnih vplivov. Avtorica predstavi delovanje slovenskega kulturnega društva Simon Gregorčič v Torontu v Kanadi od njegove ustanovitve leta 1959, sestavo njegovega odbora, pravila, gibanje števila članov, njegovo družbeno in kulturno dejavnost: gledališke predstave, pevski zbor, filmske predstave. Poseben mejnik v življenju društva sta pomenila nakup in ureditev Slovenske kmetije leta 1964 ter pestra dejavnost na njej. Začeli so s sicer tradicionalnimi pikniki, ki so zasloveli po slovenski kuhinji, organizirali so tekmovanja v balinanju, nogometu, odbojki. Člani društva Simon Gregorčič imajo prijateljske zveze z drugimi kulturnimi društvi kanadskih Slovencev. Sodelujejo pa tudi s slovenskimi društvi iz Clevelanda in Pittsburga. Često gostijo folklorne in pevske skupine iz Slovenije ter zamejstva. Organizirali so skupinske obiske stare domovine, zbiranje pomoči za žrtve potresa v Skopju in na Tolminskem, podpirajo sirotišnico v Gorici (Italija), zbrali pa so tudi denar za medicinske aparate na Onkološkem inštitutu v Ljubljani ter za obnovo rojstne hiše Simona Gregorčiča na Vrsnem. Naročili so tudi kip Simona Gregorčiča, ki ga imajo na svoji kmetiji.