

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SSS's FORTY YEARS<sup>1</sup>

Carole Rogel

A small group of academics participated in a panel entitled "Slovenia Today" in New York City on 18 April 1973 at the Roosevelt Hotel. The panel was part of a mini-conference organized by the newly founded American Association for South Slavic Studies within the auspices of the sixth annual conference of the much larger American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS). Enthusiasm for a separate professional association for those interested in Slovenia grew during the course of the evening among the twenty-five or so attendees. The panel, which was the last of the day, exceeded its time limit by one hour, so great was the excitement about prospects for a "Slovene" professional organization. Within weeks thereafter Rado L. Lenček and Toussaint Hočevar had polled prospective members about particulars. By year's end the Society for Slovene Studies (SSS) had been established as a scholarly, non-political forum for North Americans whose focus was Slovenia. Its declared purpose was to organize meetings, conferences and prepare scholarly publications. A newsletter was sent in autumn, a constitution was adopted, and plans were made for the first conference (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, spring 1974) in which SSS would sponsor its very own panels. Lenček acted as a temporary president, while Hočevar functioned as secretary-treasurer, positions which were formalized with later elections. The two remained the chief officers of SSS for nearly a decade.

During those years the SSS was active in national and regional conferences of the AAASS, and occasionally of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages (AATSEEL). The society regularly participated in two conferences annually. The paper topics generally related to language, literature, culture, and quite frequently linguistics. The latter reflected the wide interest in the Slovene language among Slavic linguists at leading universities with graduate programs. The society was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1976 in New Orleans, where Toussaint Hočevar held an academic position. In 1977 the publication of a journal *Papers in Slovene Studies* was announced. It took a few years to sort out the organization and content of the publications. The newsletter (eleven issues) had become quite long, with as many as twenty

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<sup>1</sup> Presented by Carole Rogel at the fortieth anniversary conference, New York City, April 2013.

pages containing not only time-sensitive information, but book reviews, short essays, and personal tributes. In autumn 1978, the newsletter was replaced with the "Letter," a shorter bulletin. Meanwhile the journal *Papers in Slovene Studies* after three issues was replaced with *Slovene Studies*, which would include articles, book reviews and other scholarly pieces. Lenček, Rudolph M. Susel, and Henry R. Cooper with others collaborated in issuing *Papers*. Cooper edited *Slovene Studies* from its beginning until 1984. During its early years the society's program coordinator was Metod Milač.

The society's first decade culminated with an ambitious conference held in conjunction with the fourth Conference on Balkan and South Slavic Linguistics, at the University of Chicago in March 1984. Entitled "Four Hundred Years of the South Slavic Protestant Reformation (1584–1984), it coincided with the 400th anniversaries of the first Slovene Bible (Jurij Dalmatin) and the first Slovene grammar (Adam Bohorič). The program included twenty-eight papers, nineteen of which would be published in an impressive double volume of *Slovene Studies* (6), edited by Henry Cooper.

The mid-1980s brought new officers and new directions for the society. Carole Rogel was elected president (1984–89); William Derbyshire was elected secretary-treasurer (1983–86); Timothy Pogacar succeeded him (1987–94); and Tom M. S. Priestly (1985–94) was named *Slovene Studies* editor. Toussaint Hočevar (1985–86) and Joseph Paternost (1987–90) served as program coordinators. By laws were introduced and approved in Chicago in 1984 to provide for a printing fund and for honorary memberships. Mary Molek's bequest to the society in the early 1980s became the basis for a printing fund that was invested in a certificate of deposit. In 1985, at the annual AAASS conference in New York, John Nielsen, a metallurgy professor of Slovene descent who taught at New York University, hosted society conference attendees at his Greenwich Village apartment. Thus began a series of social events that accompanied nearly every society conference thereafter. A few years later, John Nielsen, like Mary Molek, also remembered the organization in his will.

In 1985, for the Washington, D.C. annual meeting, the society began to broaden its topic repertoire and also reached outside North America for scholarly collaboration. It presented an honorary membership to Janko Lavrin (1887–1986), the noted Slovene literary historian, essayist, and translator long associated with the University of Nottingham in Great Britain. For a panel on Carinthia it invited two Austrians and a Slovene from Yugoslavia. The Austrians came, but the Slovene did not. His travel funds had been withdrawn at the last minute by Belgrade, as were the funds of others, primarily Croatians. And so the society found itself immersed rather suddenly into Yugoslav current events.

In New Orleans (1986), a number of Slovenes did participate, supported by funds from their own republic. Their presentations on two panels underlined current language issues: language maintenance in multilingual states (Canada, Norway, and Yugoslavia) and the impact on Slovene in situations involving Slovene/Serbo-Croatian language contact. Clearly, Slovene intellectuals were reaching out to SSS to provide a forum for issues that were of urgent concern at home. Some joined SSS in New Orleans and attended future conferences. One was the sociologist Dimitrij Rupel, who the following year in Boston offered a reassessment of Edvard Kocbek, a figure in disfavor in Communist Slovenia. At that same conference there was a panel on the Alps-Adriatic Working Community, founded in 1978 to help reintegrate regions that had been separated by post-World War II frontiers. An Austrian, a Slovene and two Triestiners (one Slovene) participated.

Because AAASS had planned the 1988 annual conference for Honolulu, the SSS decided to hold its annual meeting at the Midwest AAASS in Bloomington, Indiana in April. Although some members, a good number from Slovenia, did go to Hawaii, the Bloomington meeting had good attendance. It was the society's fifteenth anniversary, and it was time for some self-congratulations. In addition to the 1984 double issue of *Slovene Studies* noted above, the journal had published two other larger issues. One a Festschrift volume commemorating Rado Lenček's sixty-fifth birthday (1986), edited by Henry Cooper, the other a Festschrift honoring Toussaint Hočevar (1987), edited by Warren Mazek and Aleš Lokar, both economists, as was Hočevar. (The Festschriften were enabled by subventions from Columbia University and the University of New Orleans). But Bloomington was also a time for future projects and a discussion of escalating tensions in Slovenia. Five SSS members, who had been invited to attend a conference in Bled (9–14 May 1988), were about to leave for Slovenia. The week-long meeting was devoted to American and Canadian literature. Including SSS into that mix was a hard fit, but it was an opportunity for Slovenes to broaden ties. The Slovene Immigration Society (*Slovenska Izselsjenska Matica*) and the Ethnic Studies Institute established contacts with SSS members. *Delo*, conducted interviews. Most importantly, SSS officers met with Dušan Nečák, dean of the university's Faculty of Philosophy to discuss possibilities for future cooperation.

By 1989 Slovenes were routinely added to SSS panels, as were members from other countries outside North America. This provided valuable opportunities for scholarly exchange and new perspectives. The number of social science panels increased dramatically as Slovenes sought answers to their condition in Yugoslavia. In Chicago (1989), there was a panel on "Modernizing Socialist Economies," where leading economists presented solutions that they would soon be negotiating in a new

independent state. By the time of the AAASS Miami conference (1991), Slovenia had declared independence, but was still awaiting international recognition. The society offered several pertinent sessions. One was “Slovene Statehood: the Small Nation in a New Europe.” Among the speakers were Peter Vodopivec, the historian whose travel funds had been denied in 1985, and Dimitrij Rupel, who that spring had become independent Slovenia’s foreign minister.

Henry R. Cooper took over the SSS presidency (1990–95) just as the crisis in Yugoslavia escalated. His moving presidential comments in the “Letter” kept members aware of events in Slovenia. Timothy Pogacar, then secretary-treasurer (1987–95), together with Cooper and other members of SSS, established a separate organization for those who wished to engage in opposition to the violence in Yugoslavia. “American Scholars for an Independent Slovenia” was incorporated in Ohio and issued several letters in 1991 that were sent to members and to political leaders in the United States. Meanwhile the society continued to participate in annual AAASS conferences. Slovenia financially supported its scholars who were included in panels in the early 1990s. New scholarly contacts were established. In 1993, France Bernik, President of the Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts (SAZU) became an honorary member of SSS. The Academy proposed that a register of Slovene American scholars be prepared. A volume, entitled “Who’s Who of Slovene Descent in the United States” was prepared by Rado L. Lenček and Joseph Velikonja, and issued by SSS in 1995. The “Who’s Who...” was awarded a prize in 1996 by the Trieste Association of Slovene Intellectuals. In 1995, at its annual meeting in Washington, D.C., Slovene Ambassador Ernest Petrič hosted a reception for the society’s scholars. After 1996, the annual meetings always featured a session on some aspect of Slovenia’s foreign policy, a topic virtually unimaginable just a decade earlier. In 1996, the society also announced that it had established a website. The “Letter” editor and able webmaster in the late-1990s and early 2000s was David Stermole.

Tom M.S. Priestly (1995–98) and John K Cox (1996–98) served as SSS president and secretary-treasurer, respectively in years when the society increased its international membership. Conference panels also grew in number and offered new subjects, some based on research in Slovene archives that had been opened after the regime change. There were more sessions on Slovene international relations involving the European Union and or NATO; and there were more sessions on Slovene immigration both in Europe and abroad. Members of the Institute for Slovene Immigration (a part of SAZU) joined SSS and were regular presenters at conferences. In order to encourage graduate students in the field to pursue Slovene studies, a Graduate Student prize bearing the name of the society’s first president

was established in 1997. (An undergraduate prize, named for Joseph Velikonja, would be introduced in 2003).

The landmark conference of the decade took place in Boca Raton in 1998. It was the society's twenty-fifth anniversary, and Tom Priestly thought a special program should be planned. In addition to the regular panels, he organized back-to-back sessions on Slovenia's most distinguished architect, Jože Plečnik. Known for his work in Secession Vienna and later Masaryk's Prague, Plečnik's work is found throughout Ljubljana. A group of noted historians and practicing architects was assembled. The Plečnik scholars joined the society in a gala dinner (of twenty-one Americans and twenty-one Europeans by Priestly's count) to celebrate SSS's quarter century. The conference was memorable for other reasons as well. On the opening day, southeastern Florida was hit by Hurricane Georges, which prevented hundreds of participants from arriving. Some key officers of the society were not able to attend. At the society's business meeting, we learned that John Cox wished to be relieved of some secretary-treasurer's duties. We also learned that Tom Priestly was resigning from the presidency before completing his term. It was as though the hurricane had also swept through the SSS. After Boca Raton, its former presidents (Lenček, Rogel, and Cooper) consulted and settled on an interregnum solution: immediate past president, Henry Cooper, would replace Priestly, acting as temporary head until the 1999 conference, scheduled for autumn in St. Louis. Carole Rogel agreed to serve as treasurer until matters were settled. The spring "Letter" announced the provisional arrangements. At the St. Louis meeting, Cooper was asked to serve an additional year, and the office of secretary-treasurer was split in two, with Rogel continuing as treasurer. Metod Milac took over the secretary's job. Lea Plut-Pregelj, who had served as program coordinator under Priestly, would resume that position (1995–97; 2000–2003).

Metod Milac was elected SSS's fifth president (2001–2006) replacing interim president Cooper. "Letter" no. 49 (spring 2001) contained seminal messages from both about the society's accomplishments and goals for the future. These include continuing its excellent record of conference participation, publication, and stellar visibility among scholars in the field. For the future, widening exposure and expanding membership, particularly among younger scholars, was highlighted. Milac, a University of Syracuse library administrator, also proposed to inventory and find a home for the SSS archive. Both Cooper and Milac addressed moving forward toward establishing a center for Slovene Studies at a major academic institution in North America. The governing principle in all endeavors was to disseminate information about Slovenia and Slovenes "in a language of international communication."

So it was that the society moved from the Boca Raton “crisis” into the twenty-first Century. The year 2001, however, produced a crisis all its own. The national conference was scheduled for Arlington, Virginia (Crystal City) in November. Because of the attack on the Pentagon in mid-September Washington’s airport was closed. AAASS even considered cancelling the meeting in a hotel that was just minutes away from the damaged building. In the end the conference took place, but participation was not as large as expected. Yet Crystal City provided some reasons to celebrate. At the SSS reception, the Department of Geography of the University of Ljubljana recognized the scholarly work of Joseph Velikonja, one of the society’s founders. And the society awarded its first Rado L. Lenček Prize to Patrick Patterson. (Nine Lenček prizes have been awarded to date.) The following year when the society met in Pittsburgh, it initiated an annual “young scholars” panel. Since then, there have been eleven panels involving younger scholars—thirty-three in all with no repeats—with another planned for 2013’s Boston meeting. That same year Slovene Studies Volume 20–21 (1998–99) published an ambitious long-awaited double volume, a bi-lingual anthology of Slovene literature, produced by Henry Cooper.

The largest undertaking during the Milac presidency was an attempt to realize a center for Slovene Studies. It is something the society’s leadership began discussing during the previous decade, with some encouragement from influential persons in Ljubljana. Various ideas about what a center should be were discussed at length. One idea that was rejected as being too narrow in focus was that of establishing a chair of Slovene language. Rather the center concept that emerged would allow for exchanges of faculty and students in various fields and going in both directions. Stefan Kapsch, a member of the executive council, undertook preparing an elaborate proposal that outlined possibilities along with projected costs. The details were tweaked and refined after the Boston conference in 2004 when Slovenia’s new ambassador to the United States, Samuel Žbogar, met at length with SSS officers and talked about providing Center “seed money.” The Kapsch document was further refined and presented at Salt Lake City in 2005, where both Žbogar and Slovene Consul to New York Alenka Suhadolnik were present. Kapsch then traveled to Ljubljana in November to meet with various officials. In the end, there was never an official response to all the discussions. Instead the Slovene government, under new direction after late 2004, established a center at Cleveland State University, located in a city with a large Slovene ethnic community. Its official opening was in 2008, and its focus is on language teaching. The society, however, has not abandoned its broader center concept, which it regards as complementing, not competing with, Cleveland’s.

Timothy Pogacar (2007–2012) succeeded as president in 2007. Michael Biggins, having replaced Derbyshire as secretary in 2006 continued in that capacity, and Rogel remained treasurer until the end of Pogacar's two terms. The society continued to participate in AAASS/ASEEES conferences with impressive numbers. In New Orleans, (2007) they offered a record (twelve) panels, with only a few less in Philadelphia (2008), Boston (2009), and in Los Angeles (2010). This does not include SSS members who gave presentations in cross-cultural or interdisciplinary sessions. Increasing numbers of participants from abroad helped account for the escalating numbers. During Milac's presidency the society also had begun working with other Central Europeanists toward broader collaborations. After 2008, six affiliate societies also initiated "networking" receptions. The society, thanks to program coordinator Veronica Aplenc, was instrumental in securing a grant from the Slovene government for the first networking event. The year 2008 was the society's thirty-fifth anniversary.

Accomplishments of the Pogacar presidency also included facilitating, with the aid of Michael Biggins and the University of Washington's Open Journal Systems, an online presence of digitized issues of *Slovene Studies*. The journal will also remain in print, and its editing will increasingly be performed online as well. Pogacar's hope was to draw new, younger members into administrative positions and also to pursue the center goal. Regarding the latter some preliminary talks have taken place with Ohio State University. The matter of a home for SSSs archive has been resolved. Copies of society publications, the papers of its presidents and other officials are now housed at the Ohio State University Library's Special Collections,<sup>2</sup> administered by Predrag Matejic, curator of the Hilandar Research Library. The official documents began arriving in Columbus, Ohio in summer 2010, and are currently being processed by Mary-Allen Johnson, an archivist who studied South Slavic and Balkan languages under Kenneth Naylor. She is also a member of the Society for Slovene Studies.

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<sup>2</sup> See the OhioLINK Finding Repository website: <http://ead.ohiolink.edu/xtf-ead/view?docId=ead/OhCoUHR0002.xml&query=&brand=default>