

**SERENDIPITOUS ENCOUNTERS AND
ASSOCIATIONS—THIRTY-TWO YEARS
WITH THE SSS¹**

Robert Gary Minnich

With this brief biography I congratulate the Society for Slovene Studies upon its fortieth anniversary. I admire the way the Society has attracted students of Slovenia from diverse disciplines and distant corners of the globe. The following depicts a life begun far from the core constituencies and activities of the Society and illustrates ways the Society has formed and benefitted my own career as a social anthropologist based in distant Norway—something for which I am most grateful.

It was not inevitable that I should ever come in contact with the SSS. I entered this world with no claim to Slovene ancestry. My maternal and paternal ancestors were German speaking Anabaptists who fled to Pennsylvania in the early eighteenth century. While growing up in a small California town, Claremont, I was quite oblivious to the fact that nearby Fontana was a place of Slovene immigration. But experience as an AFS (American Field Service)² summer exchange student brought me closer to my ultimate destination.

Following my junior year I was a guest for six weeks in the Winkler Bäckerei³ in the village of Fehring / Borinje in southeast Styria—just kilometers from the intersection of the Austrian, Hungarian and Yugoslav borders. To this day I vividly recall crossing the Iron Curtain for the first time, by train from Graz to Maribor on a hot August day in 1959. I was unaware Slovenia was my destination—the word “Yugoslavia” preoccupied my imagination all day. And I was naively convinced that tall grass growing around entrances to the Maribor cathedral indicated infrequent use of this house of worship in Communist/Atheist—Yugoslavia. Such were the impressions of a California seventeen-year-old on his first grand adventure abroad.

Following my freshman year at college (1960–61) I moved to Berlin in order to fulfill, as a Conscientious Objector, my obligation to the U.S. draft. Alternative Service (1962–63) in the divided city abruptly

¹ In absentia contribution to the panel “Reflections on the fortieth anniversary of the Society for Slovene Studies (Special Event).” Columbia University, New York City, 20 April 2013.

² <http://www.afs.org>.

³ <http://www.winkler-fehring.at>.

introduced me to the Iron Curtain and exposed me to lives lived behind it. I even survived encounters with dedicated Communists so dreaded in the McCarthyite America of my upbringing. Fascinated by machinations of the Cold War in the everyday lives of Berliners on both sides of the Wall, I returned to Claremont to complete a BA in International Relations at Pomona College in 1966. A few months later Berlin again became my home. I now administered the Brethren Service Commission program⁴ in which I formerly participated, placing and supervising long-term volunteers in the Federal Republic of Germany, West Berlin, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

During Europe's year of rebellion—1968—I returned to Claremont Graduate University to complete an MA in political theory; this time accompanied by my Slovene bride who I met in Geneva and married in Berlin. Within a year my hurried M.A. culminated with a thesis comparing “Feuding Among the Albanians and the Kalinga” (1969).

Work on this thesis introduced me to socio-cultural anthropology. New academic perspectives opened. To develop them we moved to Bergen, Norway in 1972 so that I could pursue postgraduate studies at the Dept. of Social Anthropology recently founded by Fredrik Barth. But first we fulfilled our contract with the American Friends Service Committee⁵—our ticket back to Europe. For two years my wife and I managed international summer work camps in Europe and the Middle East from bases in Vienna and Cyprus.

Slovenia first became the locus of my academic endeavors forty years ago (1973) when I was required to select a location for post-graduate field research. Interest in Central Europe and global comparisons of political behavior gave way to growing affinity for Slovenia. A marriage tie had cemented my bond with all that is Slovene. I was off to Ljubljana the summer of 1974 challenged to become a serious student of Slovenia and Slovene language.

Permission to pursue long-term fieldwork in 1970s SFR Yugoslavia required a Slovene mentor and months of negotiation. Vladimir Klemenčič, then head of the Dept. of Geography at the Philosophical Faculty in Ljubljana, ably assisted me into the field. Following fieldwork in Haloze (1974–75) he brought to my attention the newly formed Society for Slovene Studies known to him through Slovene minority contacts in Italy and Carinthia. But I first came in contact with the SSS after completing my Norwegian *magistergrad* based on a dissertation entitled: “The Homemade World of Zagaj – an interpretation of the “practical life” among traditional peasant-farmers in West Haloze – Slovenia, Yugoslavia” (1979).

⁴ <http://www.brethren.org/bvs/>.

⁵ <http://afsc.org>.

Since research on Haloze was missing in contemporary Slovene ethnography, the Dept. of Ethnology at the Philosophical Faculty in Ljubljana invited me in 1980 to lecture on the region. In return it was only natural to promote in North America the work of newly found Slovene colleagues. I reviewed for *Slovene Studies* activities and publications of the recently reorganized Slovene Ethnological Society (Slovensko etnološko društvo) (1981).

A publication channel thus opened. *Slovene Studies* published the first paper I ever presented at an American Anthropological Association meeting (Los Angeles, 1981)—“The Symbolic Dimension of West Haloze Peasant Technology” (1982).

At this time I was already in the midst of a second fieldwork in the Three Border Region (*Tromeje*—Austria-Italy-Slovenia). Here, my fascination with the peasant-farmer way of life combined with growing interest in collective identity formation and in the cultural and political history of the Habsburg lands. As these themes congealed in my work I came in contact with Toussaint Hočevar, who found interest in my inductive fieldwork based approach to Slovene peasantry.

Fruitful exchanges with Toussaint led me in two directions. Attracted to my anthropological understanding of cultural continuity he challenged me to argue for the preservation of tradition in the face of modernization in Ugovizza (1989). Through Toussaint and the writing of other founding members of the SSS (cf. Velikonja, Hočevar, Novak, and Lencek in: *Papers in Slovene Studies 1975*) I came to appreciate the primary significance of language in the formation of ethnic and national identity. Subsequent dialogue with Tom Priestly revealed ways to systematize my borderland material using sociolinguistics. Conversations with and exposure to the writing of SSS members drew me to a growing body of literature in the social sciences taking issue with correlations between language and identity formation, on the one hand, and ethnicity and nationalism, on the other.

Contact with these Society members reoriented my research, and ironically led me back to the work of the founder of my home Dept., Fredrik Barth—especially the analytical perspective conceived in his widely read *Introduction to Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). A serendipitous circuit was completed—one that led me from Bergen, to Haloze, to SSS members in North America, to the Three Border Region and back to Bergen. For this second generation native of California the journey was a true odyssey.

While *Slovene Studies* was the medium that published my first contribution to an anthropological congress, the 1986 New Orleans AAASS meeting was the occasion to present what I consider to be my most

important contribution in social anthropology: *Speaking Slovene—Being Slovene* (1988/1989). Allow me to dwell a bit on the content and impact of that piece.

Speaking Slovene – Being Slovene raised few eyebrows among social anthropologists and sociolinguists. Its conclusions were unexceptional. First, many years later, linguists investigating Slavic contact and borderlands discovered the paper's relevance for their specialization (Minnich 2006).

But among students of the Three Border Region the paper ruffled feathers; it challenged conventional interpretations of collective identity formation in this multi-lingual borderland by rejecting the assumption that Slovene dialect is tantamount to Slovene identity. Adopting a constructionist perspective the paper emphasized the *relative* significance of various linguistic codes in multi-lingual locals' collective self-perception and perception of others.

I had observed that a select group of Ugovizza's older speakers of Slovene dialect understood their dialect primarily as identification with their locality. They explicitly rejected a wider association of their dialect with an ethnic group or nation. I reiterated my disagreement with local scholarship by structuring my subsequent monograph, *Homesteaders and Citizens* (1998), around the argument of the paper, that is, as an interpretation and validation of my borderland informants' collective self-understanding.

Understandably it is difficult for those with blood ties to Slovenes to concede that speakers of Slovene dialect, such as my interlocutors in Ugovizza, refused to explicitly self-identify as Slovenes. Perhaps because I am Slovene by marriage, I found it less difficult to acknowledge my Ugovizza interlocutors' complex collective self-understanding as a social fact: "We speak our own tongue (*narečje*), are Carinthians at heart and our fate is to live in Italy" (1998: 1).

Looking back at this work, mediated and promoted by membership in the Society, I concede easily that my "outsider" position in relation to Slovenia and Slovenes has shortcomings as well. In my youthful enthusiasm to challenge existing understandings of identity formation in the Three Border Region one reviewer, Mojca Ravnik (2003), kindly made me aware of my neglect of the positive, constructive intentions of many scholars of the region who I so readily criticized. I regret this. At this relaxed end of my academic endeavors it is easy to recognize that social *constructionism* is just one way of viewing the matter, *essentialism* is another. Nevertheless, it is the conviction we hold for our chosen position that drives us forward.

Speaking Slovene – Being Slovene was published a year before the Berlin wall fell. My formative years in close association with the SSS thus concluded at a point when Slovenia was coping with the demise of

Yugoslavia and negotiating a new political order. As Carole Rogel notes, this development brought profound changes to the Society. Participation from Slovenia in Society conference panels blossomed. Society meetings became opportunities for Young Scholars, from America, Slovenia, and increasingly from other European countries, to test the waters of international academic self-presentation. Contact at AAASS meetings with Slovene scholars and dignitaries was an important resource for my understanding of the transformation of Slovene society before and after statehood.

As the years passed students once under my supervision presented papers at Society meetings, among them Jernej Mlekuž, and otherwise cooperated in the work of the Society, notably, Zvone Žigon. In this way this displaced native of California also connected his endeavors in Norway and Slovenia with the work of the Society. It has been a fulfilling journey in the company of many of you gathered here today. As Norwegians say, *Takk for følge!* (thanks for following).

University of Bergen

Works Cited

- Barth, Fredrik. 1969. *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of cultural difference*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Hočevar, Toussaint. 1975. Economic determinants in the development of the Slovene national system. *Papers in Slovene Studies - 1975*: 27–78.
- Lencek, Rado. 1975. On Slavic heritage in Slovene culture. *Papers in Slovene Studies - 1975*: 145–66.
- Minnich, Robert G. 1969. Feuding among the Albanians and the Kalinga – A comparative study of feuding and its relationship to kinship structure, belief systems and political control. M.A. thesis. Government. Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA.
- . 1979. The Homemade World of Zagaj: An interpretation of the “practical life” among traditional peasant-farmers in West Haloze – Slovenia, Yugoslavia. Bergen, Dept. of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen.
- . 1981. A survey of recent publications of the Slovene Ethnological Society – *Slovensko etnološko društvo*. *Slovene Studies* 3(2): 124–28.
- . 1982. The symbolic dimension of West Haloze peasant technology. *Slovene Studies* 4(1): 21–27.
- . 1988. Speaking Slovene – Being Slovene: Verbal codes and collective self-images: some correlations between Kanalska dolina and Ziljska dolina. *Slovene Studies* 10(2): 125–47.

- . 1989. Govoriti slovensko - biti Slovenec: jezikovni kodi in kolektivne samopodobe: nekaj primerjav med Kanalsko dolino in Ziljsko dolino. *Traditiones* 18: 65–88.
- . 1998. *Homesteaders and citizens: Collective identity formation on the Austro-Italian-Slovene frontier*. Bergen, Norway, Norse Publications.
- . 2006. Collective identity formation and linguistic identities in the Austro-Italian-Slovene border region. In *Marginal linguistic identities. Studies in Slavic contact and borderland identities*. Ed. Dieter Stern and Christian Voss, 103–18. Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Novak, Bogdan. 1975. At the roots of Slovene national individuality. *Papers in Slovene Studies - 1975*: 79–126.
- Ravnik, Mojca. 2003. Socialni antropolog Robert Gary Minnich o identiteti na avstrijsko-italijansko-slovenski tromeji. *Traditiones: zbornik Inštituta za slovensko narodopisje in Glasbenonarodopisnega inštituta = acta Instituti ethnographiae Slovenorum* 32(2): 261–68.
- Velikonja, Joseph. 1975. Slovene identity in contemporary Europe. *Papers in Slovene Studies - 1975*: 1–26.