

REVIEWS

Peter Vodopivec. *Francoski inštitut v Ljubljani 1921-1947. L'institut français de Ljubljana 1921-1947.* Bilingual edition, Slovene-French. French trans. Marie-Hélène Estéoule-Exel and Matija Exel. Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2013. 162 pp., €15.00 (hard cover). ISBN: 978-961-6386-43-2.

1967 was the year I convinced my parents to let me move to Ljubljana and continue my high school there, in order to attend the music conservatory. French was my language of predilection, and the “Šubičeva gimnazija” (the high school on Šubic Street) was but some paces away from the French Institute on Trg revolucije (Revolution Square). Were it not for my cousin, though, at that time already a student of French at the university, I would probably not have gathered the courage to attend lectures there, I would not have been exposed to the contemporary trends in French intellectual life, I would not have studied Sartre (as those young “progressive” students fervently did), I would probably not have chosen to study French, nor would I have made it my profession.

The French Institute (or the French cultural center, as we called it) thus had a major impact on my generation. Little did I know, since I came from the “far away province” of Koper—albeit barely 70 miles from Ljubljana—that the French Institute had only been reinstated that same year, in 1967, and that the Slovene authorities finally consented to its opening because they had already installed the monitoring devices that would allow them to control all of its activities. I also did not suspect that my own name would most probably be placed on the list of the too-zealous, too-naïve, too-francophile, and too-enthusiastic youth that found at the institute a second home, food for thought, meaningful conversations, and worthy models to follow, to say nothing of the books that were to orient us for the rest of our lives.

In many ways my own experience at the French Institute mirrors that of the generations before WW II and their post-war fate, as described by Peter Vodopivec in his thoroughly researched and most instructive volume on this institution and, in particular, on its director of fifteen years, Jean-Yves Lacroix. This eminent scholar looks for details, examines the sources critically and synthesizes them, allowing us to make our own assessments of past facts. With archival material now more readily available, Vodopivec looks at the social, political and ideological conditions behind the establishment of the first French Institute in Ljubljana in 1921, its expansion throughout the twenties and the thirties, and especially the culmination of its activities and impact on contemporary Slovenes under Lacroix's leadership. Vodopivec is clearly interested mostly in the influence Lacroix's tenure had on the freethinking liberal young generation that constituted the institute's membership, as well as on the regular audience that attended the institute's various cultural manifestations. Vodopivec draws a portrait of a dedicated leftist French intellectual, well informed of the cultural trends in his native France, who was eager to communicate his insights not only with his circle of Slovene acquaintances and close friends, but also through articles published regularly in progressive Slovene journals. As was the case with his predecessors, first the eminent expert of the Slovene language Lucien Tesnière, who was the institute's founding director, and subsequently René Martel and Marc Vey, Jean-Yves Lacroix divided his time between the institute, his involvement with French clubs in various Slovene cities, and his teaching at the Faculty of Philosophy, where he held the position of a part-time "lecturer" (the equivalent of an academic instructor). One of his former students, Radojka Vrančič, was the first to broach the idea (in 2006) of a volume dedicated to Lacroix's experience in Slovenia. An admirer of Lacroix's fascinating lectures at the university, Ms. Vrančič, a librarian, became a specialist of French literature and one of the most prominent and respected Slovene translators of authors like Marcel Proust. Her appreciation of Lacroix and her contacts with him continued long after his forced departure from Slovenia in late 1947.

Vodopivec reveals Lacroix's story progressively through his analysis of archival documents. While the work is concerned about a particular historical personality, its scope is much wider. Lacroix's fate in Slovenia reflected that of a foreigner. In educating Slovenes in the values of his own homeland, Lacroix needed to be tactful, balanced and extremely cautious, as he was always in danger of being considered a proselytizer of foreign propaganda. Lacroix took up his demanding posts at the French Institute and at the University of Ljubljana in the autumn of 1932. As an overt democrat and a progressive thinker, he insisted on introducing to Slovene cultural circles the modernist trends in French literature, for example the contemporary French novel and feminism, which was

remarked upon by a number of Slovene journals that reported on his activities.

Lacroix became very uneasy about rising German influence, particularly its reflection in the pro-Hitler tendencies of the “old” Yugoslav leadership. During this time, politics in France oscillated between the Popular Front (1936 - 1938) and the Communist Party’s short-lived admiration for National Socialism in Germany. In 1939, Lacroix had his lectureship at the University of Ljubljana extended for an additional five years, but he may not have anticipated the full danger of the looming war for his various duties in Slovenia. When he and his Hungarian wife returned to France in 1941, they left behind all their belongings in the hope that the war would not continue much longer and that Lacroix might soon regain his employment in Slovenia. He may have held similar hopes for the library of the French Institute, which was to be “temporarily” housed at the Slovene National Library. Although the German occupiers planned to move the library piecemeal to their own country, various events prevented the execution of this plan. The leftist materials in this library continued to be perceived as an ideological threat even after WW II. While Vodopivec does not spell out his own position on this issue, it is clear from his writing that the “new order” in Yugoslavia, throughout its various stages of political indoctrination, continued to scrutinize the contents of the French library for decades after the war.

The time of Lacroix’s absence from Slovenia is only mentioned in passing, as it is not the focus of Vodopivec’s study. Most revealing of the new era in post-war Yugoslavia is the short period beginning in 1946, during which Lacroix believed he had regained his position in Ljubljana, only to be unexpectedly banned from it in October 1947. After the book’s initial foreword in both the Slovene and French languages, the first chapter of Vodopivec’s account actually deals with Lacroix’s forced departure in 1947. This clearly sets the tone for the whole volume and underscores the tragedy of a scholar and thinker who loved Slovenia, who trusted his “friends” (including those who turned out to be the regime’s informants), and who could not fathom the extent of the ideological changes that occurred in the country. The reader can surmise the general paranoia regarding “Western influences” in Vodopivec’s exploration of Lacroix’s situation. Lacroix was made a *persona non grata* and was expelled most ungraciously, first place from the hotel where the couple had to reside because they could not regain their former apartment and recuperate their belongings. It is quite remarkable that even his forced departure did not deter Lacroix’s loyalty to Slovenia, and he never truly understood the accusations against him and the underlying animosity. Would he have had a better chance at reestablishing the French Institute after Yugoslavia broke away from the Eastern Bloc in 1948? The fact that the institute did not reopen its doors until 1967 proves the contrary. The irony of the situation is

that many of those whom Lacroix helped and trusted most turned against him under the new circumstances.

Considering the limited audience for such a study written exclusively in Slovene, the decision to make it available to French-speaking readers within the same volume is highly commendable (although the book in this format only ran at 400 copies in total). The task of translating the work fell to a French-Slovene couple, Marie-Hélène Estéoule-Exel and Matija Exel, who had been closely connected to French institutions in Slovenia. Ms. Estéoule-Exel had also served as a lecturer at various Slovene schools. Interestingly, the French version reads at times even more smoothly than the Slovene original. Mathias Rambaud, the French cultural attaché in Slovenia, provided a thorough final editing, as various editorial decisions appear to have been made after the translation was completed. However, the illustrations and their joint Slovene-French captions are unfortunately spread across the volume's Slovene and French sections. For example, a clipping from a Slovene journal about Lacroix's lectures is to be found only in the Slovene portion of the text. Other illustrations are placed only in the French section of the book. Both French and Slovene readers will thus need to browse through the entire work to connect the illustrations with a specific topic. This layout must have been considered as a method to unify the two language sections, in order to avoid having two separate volumes under the same cover. Furthermore, the French translation is sometimes more explicative than the original. For example, for those unaware of the centralized political structure in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the French version gives the location of some of the ministries (situated in Belgrade). For the purpose of the volume, Vodopivec summarized in the Slovene language Lacroix's French correspondence with his Slovene counterparts. The French translators did not have access to Lacroix's originals to quote from them directly. This is also the case with the articles Lacroix published in Slovene periodicals, initially written in French, for which neither the translators' names nor the original drafts seem to be available. The decisions regarding the rendering of various titles or data into French must also have been made after the initial translation was completed. Especially in the footnotes, sometimes the names of the archival folders remain in Slovene, while they are elsewhere transposed into French. In a volume with abundant archival documentation, such issues are probably unavoidable.

This highly thought-provoking bilingual volume definitely triggers our curiosity and leads to a number of questions, both in the field of history and in translation studies. It deserves our full attention, as it may serve as a perfect example of how human history becomes extremely complex in turbulent times. For those involved in the maelstrom, as was quite obviously the case with Jean-Yves Lacroix, it was hard, if not impossible, to fully grasp the consequences of their own acts, even when

they came from sincere personal convictions, honest intentions, and may have been fully justified, as this volume demonstrates in ample detail.

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