

LOUIS ADAMIC AND SLOVENE IDENTITY

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Not long after becoming archbishop of Ljubljana, Franc Rode caused a controversy by announcing that the only true Slovenes are those who are Christian, or at least marked by Christianity. The ensuing polemic resurrected a topic as old as the Slovene nation itself: What is the essence of Slovene identity and who is a Slovene? This question once, more than six decades ago, involved Louis Adamic, the Slovene-American who is not fondly remembered by all in his ethnic group and who, due to historical circumstances, was embroiled in a controversy not of his own making.

In chapter 1 of *The Native's Return*, referring to his acquired American status, Adamic wrote:

In those nineteen years I had become an American; indeed, I had often thought I was more American than were most of the native citizens of my acquaintance. I was ceaselessly, almost frantically interested in the American scene; in ideas and forces operating in America's national life, in movements, tendencies and personalities, in technical advances, in social, economic, and political problems, and generally in the tremendous drama of the New World.

Events and things outside of America interested me but incidentally: only in so far as they were related to, or as they affected, the United States. I spoke, wrote, and read only in English. For sixteen years I had had practically no close contact with immigrants of my native nationality... In the last few years I had become an American writer, writing on American subjects for American readers. And I had married an American girl (Adamic 1934, 3).

Yet an unexpected course of events in his homeland forced Adamic seriously to reconsider this self-confident statement, the more so because he soon found himself at the center of events.

On 22 May 1932, at the time of his first visit to his homeland after a nineteen-year absence, some members of the Slovene PEN Club visited him and his family at his birthplace, Praproče, near Grosuplje. The group included some leading Slovene literati: Fran Albreht, Juš Kozak, Ferdo Kozak, Ludvik Klakočer, Mile Klopčič, Stanko Leben, Anton Melik, Ludvik Mrzel, and Oton Župančič. Adamic had not known any of these people before but he did have a vague notion that they were liberals and it seemed to him natural to meet them. However, due to his long absence from his homeland, as well as his youth and inexperience at the time of emigration, he was unaware that having met them first he automatically excluded himself from contact with the conservatives, the clerical party. And it was only a couple of months later that he became aware that

Slovenia's literature, as all other phases of her culture, is closely linked with, and affected by Slovenian and general Yugoslav ... politics, and there is almost as fierce a partisanship among writers as there is among politicians. This leads to an occasional burst of vitality in writing, but also to the formation of ingrown coteries, usually around some journal or review; then to the splitting of old coteries into new groups and cliques, and the starting of new journals and reviews; and, of course, involving no end of pettiness in this process (Adamic 1938, 123).

The visit was but one manifestation of the public attention being paid Adamic. He was interviewed a number of times and the question that most frequently arose concerned his Slovenehood. He was asked, for example, what influence Slovene language and Slovene poetry had had upon his work, and Adamic honestly answered that he had never thought about that. He did, as a high school student, read Ivan Cankar and, in 1926, translated the latter's *Hlapec Jernej* (*Yerney's Justice*) into English (Kočevar 1932, 2). But Adamic frequently called attention to his faulty Slovene; for example, in an author's note to the Slovene translation of an excerpt from *The Native's Return*, where he claims that he is able to use Slovene only when talking about simple, everyday matters, whereas more complex things, such as his life in America, require English (Adamic 1932, 31).

Interestingly, though, not everyone considered Adamic's Slovene so deficient. In his memoir on the life and work of Adamic, the

writer's younger brother France includes and cites a number of letters, all in Slovene, written by Adamic to various family members. The earliest is from 1915; another, long letter is from 1926 (Adamič 1983, 24–26, 31). This was further confirmed by the poet Mile Klopčič, who in an interview stated that Adamic's Slovene was good and fairly fluent (Klopčič 1977), and that he was capable of writing in his mother tongue. Before his visit of 1932, Adamic and Klopčič had exchanged a number of letters, all written in Slovene.

Soon after the picnic at Praproče, Župančič wrote an article entitled "Adamič in slovenstvo ("Adamic and Slovenehood"),¹ which was published in the September 1932 issue of *Ljubljanski zvon*. The article, originally intended to honor Adamic's first homecoming, was submitted too late to be included in the "American issue" of the journal, the one Adamic greatly helped to produce in the summer of the same year. What was meant to be a warm welcome to the "prodigal son" from America deeply disturbed the Slovene intelligentsia.

Župančič's ideas that many found totally unacceptable all had to do with Adamic and his Slovenehood (see below). Nonetheless, Albreht, editor-in-chief of *Ljubljanski zvon*, did publish Župančič's article, despite his personal disagreement with the poet's ideas, for he considered "his" journal

a free cultural tribune... However, the striving of Slovene literary workers towards full emancipation from any political influence has been sadly shattered against the dry reality of "Slovene circumstances" ... This was occasioned by Župančič's article "Adamic in slovenstvo," which naturally called for a response. Such responses were written by Ferdo Kozak, Stanko Leben, and Josip Vidmar. Also, the editor considered it necessary to explain why he had published Župančič's article (Albreht 3).

Albreht was, however, unwilling to publish the responses in the journal. He viewed them as a unanimous attack on Župančič. After much ado and negotiation, a compromise was reached by the editor and publisher—first one compromise, then another, modified—only to be

¹ Župančič's article was translated into English by Joseph Zelle. See "Adamic and Slovenism," *The American Slav*, December 1939: 21–32 and February 1940: 12–13.

proclaimed unacceptable by the publisher a few days later. And so Albreht and the entire editorial board resigned in November 1932. A new journal, *Sodobnost*, was to replace *Ljubljanski zvon*. A pamphlet entitled “Krizna Ljubljanskega zvona” (“The Crisis of *Ljubljanski zvon*” [Albreht 1932]), which appeared late in 1932, contained all the articles that had not been accepted by the journal in order to prove that they had not been written to attack Župančič but to repudiate some of his ideas.

The common thread running through these articles was disagreement with Župančič’s thesis that inner Slovenehood cannot be lost. When Župančič and Adamic first met in May of 1932 they struck up a friendship. Župančič recognized in his American colleague a talented young author who had ventured into the world. The pamphlet not only affirmed Adamic’s talent but spread it in his homeland. Although Župančič’s article was primarily about Adamic the writer, it also was about the sad state of contemporary, including recent Slovene literature. The element Župančič found most lacking in it was laughter, Adamic-style, uninhibited, relaxed. There had been too much pessimism, melancholy, and sorrow in Slovene literature, according to Župančič, who thought the literature should open up to the world. Župančič juxtaposed American and Europe as well as America and Slovenia. America was boundless, the land of freedom, and of unlimited opportunity. Adamic did well in making use of all of these. Europe was less free and more traditional, and these “qualities” were even multiplied in tiny Slovenia. So the poet asked himself what would have become of Adamic had he stayed in Slovenia. His conclusion: Adamic would never have achieved what he had achieved in the U.S. Poetically, Župančič expressed his idea in the following way: “America [gave him] the broadness, Slovenia gave him the depth. And a healthy body and soul with strong basic instincts. And mother’s precious heritage—laughter” (Župančič 159). In short, as Zadavec puts it, Adamic “went and captured America, got to know and created a spiritual self-defense system to help him persist in the human jungle” (Zadavec 230). As a poet of vitality and optimism himself, Župančič concurred with Adamic that in order to find a balance in the “human jungle” of America as well as in one’s own life, one should resort to humor. Župančič’s second point was that despite the deplorable fact that Adamic had, in the past nineteen years, lost fluency in his mother tongue (it was lost, so Župančič said, somehow unknowingly, naively), his essential *slovenstvo* (Slovenehood) was not lost. “Adamic remained a

Slovene in the essence of his spirit..." True Slovenehood cannot be equated with Catholicism, liberalism, melancholy, lyricism, and so forth. "The way I feel, such interpretation of Slovenehood is impatient, megalomaniacal, oh, and so sterile," wrote Župančič (519).

The fierce reaction that followed surpassed Župančič's worst expectations. His critics disagreed with almost everything he had said in his article. Kozak defended the Slovene language as the outward sign of Slovenehood (Albreht 17), Leben felt personally attacked when Župančič spoke about "the watchful guards of Slovenehood" (Albreht 20), Vidmar questioned Župančič's true feeling for and about the Slovene language and summoned the poet to explain his views unequivocally (Albreht 31). And Albreht considered it his duty to defend his decision to publish Adamic's works in *Ljubljanski zvon*: "Zvon published Adamic's work because it is a worthy product of a man of Slovene blood, because in it there is some kind of broadness and freshness, some basic health and courage..." (Albreht 57). On the other hand, Adamic had been rejected by *Dom in svet*, the conservative journal, from the start. The journal had publicly reproached the author for having taken up with *Ljubljanski zvon* instead, although it had been the first Slovene periodical to review *Dynamite* (Adamic 1934). *Dom in svet*'s position became known before the dispute over Župančič's article and it gave Adamic "a glimpse of a phase of Slovenian life which probably was inevitable in tiny, narrow Carniola but, nevertheless, which I did not like" (Adamic 1938, 124). The jealousy of *Dom in svet* resulting from Adamic's collaboration with the rival journal, with which he had had no contacts prior to his visit (Vidmar 1977), turned into an open triumph after the polemic broke out. Adamic was accustomed to professionally-grounded, not politically-based rejection, "and so the turn-down by *Dom in svet* was not a great blow to me," he wrote (Vidmar 1977). However, he does admit further on that his American self was unaffected but not so his Slovene self.

Whereas a good deal has been written about this polemic from the Slovene point of view, much less has been said from others. Whether he wanted it or not, Adamic was part of the dispute and many harsh words were addressed to him. He reacted at some length to the affair in *My America, 1928–1938* (Adamic 1938). The title suggests an unlikely place to search for a response, but Adamic considered himself both an American and a Slovene, "an American of Slovene origin"

(127). It is in this sense apparent that Adamic had to speak to the dispute in this book. In it, he assessed Župančič's article:

The essay was beautiful prose, poetic and general, very friendly and kind to me, too kind; and permeated with the wistful tragedy of a great poet writing for a tiny nation. I shall not tell here everything it contained, for that would require me to explain a hundred and one things not generally understood by members of a great nation, and *that* would require a book by itself. But—at the risk of oversimplifying the thing—one of the main ideas and arguments running through the article was that, although I had gone to America as a boy and become Americanized and had lost the fluency of my mother tongue and taken to writing in English or American, *slovenstvo* was an important, if not the dominant factor in my life and my function. Basically, maintained the poet, I was an offspring of Slovenia, “the true inner Slovenia”; and the spirit of “inner *slovenstvo*” lived in me. I had received it from my peasant mother, from the very air of rural Slovenia, and America did not kill it, nor harm it. America took nothing from me, nothing good, vital, new, fresh, vivid, generous, and important, and gave me much, because America was big, and had much to give. In America I had room; there I could develop, grow, find for the essential *slovenstvo* in me wider, fuller expression than I could probably ever have found had I remained at home. He insisted that, although I had—regrettably—become more or less separated from my native language, and even if I myself inclined to emphasize my *amerikanstvo*, I was still a Slovenian; and that my work had certain virtues stemming from the virtues inherent in the sound mass of Slovenian people (128).

As for the title of Župančič's article, Adamic translated it “Adamic and Slovenianism” and hastened to explain the word as “everything that pertains, or concerns, being a Slovenian” (127). Knowing that Slovenes read more into the word than Americans could possibly anticipate, he continued,

To a great many Slovenians, *slovenstvo* is intense nationalism, inextricably tied up with every bit of

Slovenian tradition and history, cultural and otherwise; with every word of the Slovenian language and all its problems; and with every inch of Slovenian soil... It involves quick, strong emotions, which Americans, whose nationalism is not so complex and intense, would find difficult to understand and appreciate, even if I succeeded in fully explaining it (128).

Adamic was flattered by Župančič's generous personal evaluation as a writer and "found it pleasant to hope that it possibly contained some truth" (128). Tempted, he began to search his memory to find instances of his Slovenehood in the past nineteen years. He found them, indeed, in trivial matters such as his aversion to wasting food, his impulse always to clean his plate, hungry or not, his uneasiness at the sight of heaps of discarded items in America.

Most important here, Adamic not only spoke about the affair from a historical perspective but he also gave us his understanding of Župančič's article. And that was closely linked to what Župančič had told him in 1932—namely, that he, at one point in his life, was very close to emigrating to America and that a pure coincidence prevented him and his parents from doing so. Thus Adamic believed Župančič must have placed himself in his (i.e., Adamic's) shoes, and while doing so asked himself what would have happened to him had he emigrated. What would have happened to his Slovenehood had he lost his mother tongue? "He seemed to me one of the finest persons," wrote Adamic, "I had ever encountered, but deep in him I sensed much bitterness, which he tried not to show—the bitterness of the exceptional man who was the son of a tiny nation and trying to function within that nation's narrow confines" (127).

The narrowness of his nation's confines Adamic was to experience himself after the publication of *The Native's Return*, which was banned in Yugoslavia. But even before that, soon after his return to the U.S., he made a mental reckoning, summing up all the positive and negative aspects of cultural life in Slovenia. Having evaluated both the work of liberal and conservative writers, admitting that for the latter their Catholicism "in a way ... shattered for them the geographic, political, and spiritual boundaries of Slovenia" (Adamic 1938, 134), he was glad to be in a position to return to the U.S., for "writing in the American language, I had scope, spiritual and physical elbow room, a

potential audience of many millions of people, an opportunity to develop” (135). His meetings with Župančič, as well as their conversations about Ivan Cankar that were followed by Adamic’s reading on the topic, fully persuaded him that the cultural situation in Slovenia was not good. It was too self-oriented, too much energy was being lost in petty skirmishes, and worst of all, one could not make a living from writing alone. The freedom, the unlimited possibilities of his new homeland outweighed Adamic’s undoubtedly great love for his “old country.” Off and on he repeated how lucky he was to have become an American writer. “Had I remained in Slovenia and become a Slovenian writer, I could not possibly have published a book that would have infuriated King Alexander, thrown the Belgrade Foreign Office into panic, and generally had the effect of a blow at tyranny...” (135).

As Zadavec notes, Adamic “brilliantly realized that Slovenes could only be saved by healthy cosmopolitanism and internationalism” (Zadavec 265). To summarize this view and its attendant merits and shortcomings from the perspective of the present, Adamic doubtless had an urge to escape, from his problems at school at home, which resulted mainly from his unwillingness to study for the priesthood. When he first arrived in America, on 31 December 1913, he was a fifteen-year old boy, highly impressionable and willing to learn. As he did so, his suppressed revolt against authority, subordination, narrow-mindedness, and bigotry gradually crystallized first into a view of life and then into a worldview; both became the subjects of his books.

Nothing was the same for Adamic after his visit to Slovenia in 1932. Having been lovingly met by his half-forgotten family, publicly celebrated as one of America’s leading writers, rejected by the conservatives (after *The Native’s Return*) and supporters of the Belgrade regime, probed by journalists with unpleasant questions, he was virtually, for the first time in his life, in a confined position. He had to answer the question Who was he, Louis Adamic or Lojze Adamič? The question proved both deeply personal as well as general, casting him as a representative of a certain group of people, the emigrants. His personal identity soon formed itself into the useful syntagm: “American of Slovene birth,” one that is popular today as well. The question of Slovenehood that could or could not be retained under certain conditions, made him feel vulnerable and desirous of evening scores with people who had, due to no obvious fault of his own, attacked him.

The affair with Župančič made him agree with the poet that it was essential for small nations, like his own, of opening up to the world.

And yet his shortcoming may be his inability to recognize and acknowledge the importance of his heritage and his mother tongue. Without being who he was, a Slovene by birth, Adamic could not have written two-thirds of his books. His visit to Slovenia gave him back the love of his family and his native land; however, he could never warm to the idea that he could, if only he wished, speak, read, and write Slovene as well as English. It is not that he was ashamed of Slovene; he only found it useless, believing that as a writer he was obliged to try to reach vast audiences. And that, he felt, could only be done in English.

As was the case with so many things in his life, Adamic, a slave to haste, a true workaholic, never completed his thinking concerning the question of Slovene identity. It remained open-ended, just like many of his books, and perhaps his life.

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POVZETEK

LOUIS ADAMIČ IN SLOVENSKA IDENTITETA

Ob polemiki o slovenski identiteti zadnjih let smo se spomnili polemike iz leta 1932, ki jo je ob obisku Louisa Adamiča v domovini sprožil Oton Župančič s svojim člankom Adamič in slovenstvo, objavljenim v Ljubljanskem zvonu. Pričujoči prispevek se osredotoča na Adamičevo reakcijo na omenjeno polemiko, na njegova lastna razmišljanja o svojem slovenskem bistvu in predvsem na njegovo neodločenost glede pomena slednjega. Adamič se je namerno distanciral od slovenskega okolja v Ameriki, v želji, da bi tako lažje uspel kot ameriški pisatelj. Z Župančičem sta si bila enotna glede potrebnosti odpiranja slovenskega kulturnega prostora svetu, vendar je, po mnenju avtorice, Adamič s svojim kozmopolitizmom pretiraval. Ni se dovolj zavedal dejstva, da mu je prav njegovo slovenstvo (vključno z znanjem jezika, kar je tako rad zanikal) omogočilo postati priznan ameriški avtor, saj je svoje bralce v prvi vrsti pritegoval s tematiko svojih del, ta pa se je v veliki meri napajala iz domačih virov. Tako je Adamič v svojih razmišljanjih o slovenstvu nasploh in o lastni pripadnosti ostal sredi poti, nedorečen.