

ASPECTS OF THE SLOVENE COMMUNITY IN CLEVELAND, OHIO

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When Slovene immigrants first began to arrive and settle permanently in Cleveland in the 1880s and 1890s, they confronted a cultural environment that was in many respects different from the one to which they had been accustomed in their homeland. Each immigrant had to respond to these new conditions of life to one degree or another, a response which varied in specific detail with each individual. This article discusses some of the more important general kinds of changes which the typical Slovene immigrant had to make in order to adjust successfully to American circumstances. What, in other words, were the kinds of things likely to happen to the immigrant upon or soon after arrival in Cleveland? And what was the overall response of the Slovene immigrants as a group to these problems?

In an article as brief as this, of course, only some broad and preliminary observations are possible. Hopefully, however, they will indicate some of the factors that should be kept in mind when exploring the history of the Cleveland Slovene community and, perhaps, of the other Slavic and south European groups which formed settlements in the Cleveland area. A rigorous commitment to factual accuracy and objectivity is a prerequisite to the historian—and of course to researchers in other disciplines. This goes without challenge. Yet the historian must always remember the distinction between history and mere descriptive chronology or unwarranted glorification of a particular ethnic group. Facts do not in fact speak for themselves; it is the historian or other interpreter who evaluates their significance and gives them meaning, and the success with which this is done depends as much on empathy with and understanding of the subject as it does on the depth and extent of research performed. This point seems frequently to elude those preoccupied with statistical—or quantitative—data accumulation.

Finally, this essay indicates some of the areas in which additional basic investigation needs to be undertaken. Also—and this point cannot be made too strongly—it is vitally important to preserve as much of the

written and oral records still extant pertaining to the history of the Cleveland Slovene community, and indeed all records compiled by Slovenes. Once such records are lost or destroyed, something which has occurred all too often in the past, they can never be recreated. At the same time, however, it is necessary that when such records are preserved they be available to researchers fully and freely. There can be no censorship of access to such data. For this reason, and also for safety considerations, collections of material should not be housed privately or in quasi-private archival depositories. Because the history of American Slovenes is integrally an aspect of American history—however little known and understood an aspect heretofore—all such records should remain on deposit in the United States and not be transmitted to foreign holdings where access may be restricted because of political considerations. Of course, copies of such documents should be freely available to all persons and institutions, domestic or foreign, desiring them. But no aspect of the history of American Slovenes can be regarded as the private preserve of any individual or group, of whatever ideological persuasion, or however well-intentioned the motives.

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The great majority of the Slovene immigrants to Cleveland in the 1880-1924 period came from a peasant background. Most had grown up in or near a small village, with a thoroughly rural environment. Few had more than five or six years of formal education although most had some degree of literacy in their native Slovene and many—especially the males—could handle at least a little German. None, of course, had any knowledge of English. Given this agricultural background, then, few arrived in Cleveland with any specialized skills of the kind that would qualify them to enter the American labor market as anything other than manual workers, at least at the beginning. Nor did the early Slovene migrants originally regard themselves as more than temporary visitors in the United States. The principal reason for their journey was the desire to earn and save enough money to permit an eventual return to family and friends in Slovenia. They did not see themselves as immigrants in the true sense of the word, as persons who consciously, for whatever reasons, were abandoning their native homeland forever. This attitude, which softened only gradu-

ally as the years of residence in America lengthened, contributed to a disinclination to attempt any real degree of assimilation into the dominant American culture. And by the time most of the immigrants accepted the fact that America was to be their permanent new homeland, the place where they would spend the rest of their lives, the nature of the ethnic community they had created in the interim minimized the need for any extensive assimilation into American society, certainly not in the sense of surrendering their basic Sloveneness.

The immigrants were drawn to each other initially because they did not "fit" into the new environment in which they found themselves upon arrival in America and specifically in Cleveland, and because realistically they had nowhere else to turn. This led them, in a defensive reaction, to develop a strong sense of ethnic identity. They evolved a degree of separateness not only from the native American society but also from other ethnic groups in their vicinity. Thus, while the early Slovene immigrants had ties with Slovaks and Germans, such ties generally were abandoned when the Slovenes were able to function on their own. By the end of the 1890s there already were enough Slovenes present in the Cleveland area to permit the formation of specifically Slovene economic, cultural, and religious organizations. And as this process intensified in the first two decades of the twentieth century, not only the pioneer immigrants who had come in the 1880s and 1890s, but also those who arrived after 1900 were able to live and often even work in an environment that was thoroughly Slovene. The description especially of the St. Clair Avenue Slovene community as constituting a kind of miniature Ljubljana was in many ways an accurate one. The St. Clair area, and to a somewhat lesser degree the Newburgh and Collinwood settlements, were a place where the immigrant rarely was required to use anything other than his or her native Slovene. For most of the immigrants most of the time it must have seemed as if they had never left the homeland. The existence of these coherent Slovene communities, particularly in the years after 1900—to select an arbitrary date—greatly eased the transitional and cultural shock problems the typical immigrant otherwise would have faced.

Given this general background, then what was the nature of the Slovene ethnic community in Cleveland? What were some of the specific kinds of functions it per-

formed, and why was it possible for it to become so comprehensive and well-rounded a societal structure? Certainly the earliest Slovene settlers in Cleveland, those who came prior to 1900, led a lifestyle which was very restricted. There were long hours of hard work, when jobs were available, at low pay. After work the immigrant went home, and home consisted usually of a crowded boardinghouse arrangement where he both slept and took his meals. Whatever free time was available after the requirements of work and sleep customarily was spent in conversation, cards, correspondence with family members in the homeland or elsewhere in the United States, and various other personal needs. Saturday night in a saloon was the only time given over to genuine recreation. Sunday was a day of rest, often broken by attendance at church services. This pre-1900 Cleveland Slovene population also was imbalanced in the sense that most of its members were young adult males, either single or married but the latter with wives and children still in Slovenia. By the early 1900s, however, a larger proportion of the community began to consist of women and children and this more normal demographic spread was combined with a broader age structure. It would be particularly useful to have reliable statistical data on this point.

The arrival of wives and children in growing numbers indicated a more or less permanent commitment to America. The formation of complete family units also led to such patterns as an accelerated rate of home ownership—another useful topic for research—and to a progressively greater interest in various kinds of economic, cultural, and religious activities. Thus, for example, already by the early 1890s the St. Clair Slovene settlement was being served by its own ethnic parish, Saint Vitus, and by the early 1900s the Newburgh Slovenes had constructed Saint Lawrence parish. The first mutual insurance societies, designed to protect the immigrants and their families from the constantly present hazards of death and illness, had begun to appear by 1900 and would soon proliferate so widely that a large majority of the immigrants belonged to at least one of them. By 1900 a large number of the more ambitious and entrepreneurial immigrants had begun to go into business for themselves. While most such ventures ended eventually in failure, a significant minority succeeded. The economic history of the Slovene ethnic community in Cleveland, including the

role played by the insurance societies, is a topic certain to yield valuable results to the diligent researcher. Although saloonkeeping was a favorite early venture—and later as well—groceries and meat markets also soon appeared. By the advent of World War I in 1914, some Slovenes had established more specialized businesses, such as clothing and furniture stores, funeral parlors, etc. These varied emporiums catered primarily to the needs of the burgeoning Slovene settlements in the Cleveland area, and the businessmen never lost sight of this fact. Slogans such as "rojak k rojakom" and "svoji k svojim" were much in vogue in the community during the first several decades of the present century. And while such slogans might have enjoyed some success in drumming up business for the storeowners, they also contributed to the pattern of the Slovene immigrants relying upon themselves or their fellow-countrymen for most of their basic needs. The overall effect of this was to increase the comprehensiveness and cohesiveness of the community as a whole and thereby to decrease the degree of assimilation or "melting" into the native American society. The fact that there were numerous individual exceptions to this pattern should not obscure the fact of its presence. In the general area of culture, singing and dramatic societies appeared, their primary emphasis being the performance of Slovene songs and plays. And, finally, by 1900 Cleveland area Slovenes could read their own locally produced newspaper, *Nova Domovina*, or could subscribe to such papers as *Amerikanski Slovenec* and *Glas naroda*.

What was the purpose behind all of this activity? Why did the immigrants go to the trouble and expense of establishing and patronizing these various kinds of endeavors? Why indeed did the ethnic community itself develop beyond merely a geographical area where persons of the same ethnic background chose to live in close proximity to one another? Why did they not in the main take the trouble to learn and use English as their normal medium of expression so that they could merge into the native American society? The answer to these questions is fairly straightforward. In fact the typical Slovene immigrant wanted to make as few changes or compromises in his or her cultural and social makeup as possible. The ethnic community and the broad range of services it provided was the vehicle which permitted this. For those able and so inclined, of course, the ethnic community

also provided a base from which to make the move into a more thoroughly assimilated status. But as a general rule it must be kept in mind that very few immigrants were in any sense anxious or even willing to surrender their cultural heritage and to adopt a new language and the culture and customs that went with it. Rather, the impetus of their collective experience in America was to drive them in the direction not merely of preserving the essence and many of the overt expressions of their native culture but of intensifying their allegiance to it. It was of course impossible to avoid any contact or compromise with the American society and what could be termed the American way of doing things. But the medium of the ethnic community permitted the Slovene immigrants to absorb or filter in those essential borrowings or adaptations smoothly and gradually. It was not so much that the immigrants became Americans of Slovene background as much as it was that they remained Slovenes who absorbed a dose of American culture, a dose whose strength varied with each individual immigrant.

Given this perspective, then, it can be useful to view the Slovene settlements in Cleveland as constituting a kind of separate society, or at least as a kind of autonomous society. Elsewhere in this volume, Professor Irene Portis Winner discusses some of the problems inherent in establishing the boundaries of what she calls ethnic units. Taking the Slovenes of Cleveland as a whole, however, it is possible to describe them as a single entity for purposes of general description and analysis. That the Slovene society which existed in Cleveland functioned within the framework of the surrounding native American society does not mitigate the fact of its existence. In part by choice and in part by circumstance and compulsion, the Slovene immigrants to Cleveland set themselves apart. They turned in upon themselves. They used the surrounding or outside native American society only in rare circumstances, such as when contacts with the courts, government agencies, the police, and the workplace were unavoidable. But nearly everything else came to be available within the ethnic community, especially in the years between 1900 and 1940. This point can be illustrated by a focus on the hypothetical typical Slovene male immigrant of this period. Such a person customarily would find a job in industry as a manual or perhaps semi-skilled worker. To function easily in his work

experience it was necessary to acquire a rough working knowledge of English. In cases where the employers had the wisdom to provide foremen or supervisors who could speak Slovene to the workers, or where German could serve as the medium of expression, even a minimal knowledge of English might not be necessary, at least at the beginning. When this immigrant-worker left his job at the end of the day and returned to the confines of the ethnic community, what did he find? He found stores and businesses in which he could shop in his own language. He did not have to suffer the embarrassment of trying to make himself understood to a clerk who could speak only English. He could ask for what he wanted and have new products explained to him clearly and easily. When he desired amusement he could visit one of the numerous Slovene owned and operated saloons available in the community. For a higher level of culture he could attend concerts or plays performed by Slovene groups in Slovene. Indeed, if so inclined, he could participate in such groups himself. Should he wish to read Slovene newspapers and other periodicals and books he could use the facilities of the local Slovene Library or the Cleveland Public Library. He had easy access to Slovene-language materials printed both in the United States and in Slovenia. Most if not all of his friends and neighbors would be fellow Slovene immigrants. If he happened to be religiously inclined—and this meant he would be Roman Catholic—he could attend services at St. Vitus or St. Lawrence. To protect himself and his family from the ravages of death or illness he would join one of the Slovene mutual insurance societies. This predominantly Slovene environment, the specific manifestations of which could be enumerated even more extensively, was still more pervasive for the average female Slovene immigrant. She might well have no real contact with the English-speaking society whatever.

Why was it possible for this kind of ethnic society to emerge and, equally important, flourish over an extended period of time? It was possible because of the extraordinary degree of cultural pluralism which American society permitted the Slovene immigrants. To a remarkable degree the immigrants had the opportunity to do substantially what they wanted within the confines of their communities, so long as they did not break the law and so long as they did not bother or interfere with the

rights of others. It was very much a live and let live situation. The Slovene immigrants were not subjected to any discernible degree to Americanization pressures emanating from the native American society. At least, such efforts had no appreciable effect on the immigrants and the institutions they established. It is true that the immigrants had what they felt were serious problems with their American-born and raised children in terms of the latter often rejecting any significant identification with the heritage of their parents, but this was not a factor so far as the immigrants themselves were concerned. The fact was that throughout their presence in Cleveland, a city notable for the number and variety of defined ethnic communities, the immigrants could create the cultural environment they preferred. There was no external problem, for example, about creating and maintaining all sorts of Slovene language cultural groups, newspapers, or churches. Whether such institutions lasted or not depended on whether there was sufficient support for them within the community. But they did not collapse because native Americans attacked them as being somehow un-American, or inconsistent with life in America.

The opportunity which the Slovene immigrants to Cleveland had to find not merely economic security for themselves and their families, but also to develop a high degree of Slovene cultural identity culminated within the framework of the ethnic community. The freedom they had on the one hand to cultivate their native heritage while on the other they could function as American citizens who respected the laws and institutions of their adopted homeland produced a kind of hybrid culture which was enormously satisfying to most of its members. It was a case of these immigrants being able to absorb much of the best of both cultures without losing their basic identification—their roots—with the original homeland and culture. Still, this immigrant-based community was a hybrid. It could not last beyond the generation which created it. The immigrants simply could not transmit to their American-born descendants the essences of the cultural traits and attitudes which they had brought with them from the homeland. The American-born generations would have to follow their own paths of development. Yet this fact does not obscure the vitality or the value of that original immigrant Slovene society in Cleveland

and the contributions it made not only to those who participated in it and to their descendants, but also to the overall history of Cleveland and, indeed, in a broader sense, of the United States.

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