

AN AMERICAN VISITOR TO THE IDRİJA MERCURY MINE IN 1866

Toussaint Hočevar

This note is dedicated to the memory of Ivan Mohorič, economic historian, who died in Ljubljana on October 4, 1980. Born into a miner's family in Idrija, Slovenia, on May 12, 1888, Mohorič studied law at the Czech University in Prague. During the interwar period he served as Secretary General of the Slovene Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Ljubljana, as Minister of Commerce and Industry in Belgrade, and he represented the first Yugoslavia at many international economic conferences. In 1946 Mohorič joined the newly founded Faculty of Economics in Ljubljana as a research associate and resumed his active interest in economic history. (As early as 1914 he had published a survey of the history of cooperatives in Slovenia in the Gorizia/Gorica review Veda.)

Between the end of World War II and his death, Mohorič published inter alia historical monographs treating the industrialization of the Meža Valley, the industries of Tržič, the mercury mine of his native Idrija, railroads in Slovenia, and iron and steel making in Upper Carniola (Gorenjsko). Finally, at the age of ninety, he brought to completion Problemi in dosežki rudarjenja na Slovenskem: Zgodovina rudarstva in topilništva v stoletju tehnične revolucije (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1978). In a letter addressed to me on May 13, 1980, he wrote of this work: "Delo naj bi odpiralo mladini horizonte novih vidikov in jih navduševalo za proučevanje vsega, kar je ostalo ob rudarski problematiki nerešenega."

The furnace used in the extraction of mercury from the mercury-bearing ore represents a case of mid-nineteenth century technology transfer from Slovenia to the United States. As reported by William N. Abelo,¹ in California the New Idria Quicksilver Mine used the same square type furnace as the quicksilver mine of Idrija, Slovenia. The introduction

of the square furnace to America falls between 1854, when the first quicksilver was produced in New Idria, and 1861, when William Brewer of the Whitney Geologic Survey recorded that his party found the square furnaces of New Idria at an approximate elevation of 2,500 feet, where the ore from the New Idria mine as well as that from the San Carlos mine, located at an elevation of 5,000 feet, was treated. Abeloe does not go beyond saying that the square type furnace was supplanted by a more effective type "long ago."²

I have noted this particular case of technology transfer in an earlier contribution.³ Subsequently, with the assistance of Ivan Mohorič, I was able to obtain xerox copies of two 1866 documents preserved in the Mestni Muzej of Idrija. These documents indicate that American interest in the technology used in Idrija continued beyond the initial installation of square furnaces in New Idria.

The first document is a letter addressed to the State Mining Office (K. k. Bergamt) in Idrija by the State Agency for the Distribution of the Products of Mines (K. k. Bergwerks-Producten-Verschleiss-Direction) in Vienna. The letter introduces the bearer, Mr. C. E. Hawley, the director of the California Quicksilver Works, who had been recommended by the wholesale firm C. M. Miller & Co., the largest buyer of the State Agency's quicksilver and cinnabar. Since Mr. Hawley wished to inspect the mining and ore processing operation in Idrija, the administration of the state-owned mine was asked by the State Agency to allow Mr. Hawley such a visit. He would be delighted to reciprocate by providing information on operations at the American works. This letter was issued on September 22, 1866, and it was carried by Hawley to Idrija. It bears the reference number 3605.

A note with the reference number 3606, also addressed to the State Mining Office in Idrija and almost identical in content with the letter given to Hawley, was sent to Idrija by registered mail on the same day. Two days later, on September 24, 1866, it was provided in the State Mining Office of Idrija with the number 1012/41, and a memorandum was written on the back of the note. The memorandum instructed the managers of both the mine and of the smelting works to assist Mr. Hawley according to his wishes. Both managers entered their names alongside the memorandum before the note was returned to the State Mining Office. Since the letter given to Hawley also reached Idrija, we can infer from both documents that Hawley undertook the trip to Idrija and that he visited the mine and the ore smelting facilities there.

While it is perhaps reasonable to assume that the visit to Idrija was not the sole reason for Hawley's trip to Europe, the benefits he expected to derive from the visit must have been sufficient to justify what appears to have been a journey by train from Vienna to Logatec, east of Ljubljana, and thence by more traditional means to Idrija. From the available documents it is impossible to tell what exactly Hawley had hoped to, or did, accomplish by his inspection of installations in Idrija. Moreover, it is not clear whether he was the director of the New Idria Quicksilver Mine or of another California mine.

In 1978, when Mohorič obtained the two aforementioned documents, the Director of the Idrija Museum indicated that the archive of the Idrija mine was still being catalogued, and at that time the two documents were apparently the only ones that could be located concerning the American links with Idrija.⁴ At some future date other documents may be discovered in the Idrija archives which would shed additional light on American interest in the technology of Idrija in general as well as on the initial technology transfer, i.e., the adoption of the Idrija-type square furnace for mercury extraction in California. The outlook for further research on this topic with the aid of American sources may be less promising since it has been reported that "the early history of the New Idria mining district is clouded by poor records."⁵

University of New Orleans

FOOTNOTES

¹Historic Spots in California (third edition) (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1966), 314.

²Ibid.

³Toussaint Hočevar, "Slovene Geographical Names in the United States," Society for Slovene Studies Newsletter, No. 9 (Fall 1977), 2.

⁴Edwin B. Eckel and W. B. Myers, "Quicksilver Deposits of the New Idria District, San Benito and Fresno Counties, California," California Journal of Mines and Geology, 42/2 (April 1946), 85.

⁵Letter by Juriј Bavdaž, Director of the Mestni Muzej in Idrija, to Ivan Mohorič, January 13, 1978.