

THIS ISSUE IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
MARY MOLEK,
BENEFACTRESS OF THE SOCIETY FOR SLOVENE STUDIES
AND CONTRIBUTOR TO
SLOVENE-AMERICAN HERITAGE STUDIES

MARY MOLEK: AUTHOR, EDITOR, CURATOR (1909-1982)*

On the fifth anniversary of Mary Molek's death, the Society for Slovene Studies remembers her with gratitude. Without her generous bequest the publishing activity of the Society could not have reached its present level. Moreover, she gave of her own talents to Slovene studies, as a writer, as an editor, and as curator of Slovene-American archives. A short biography will provide the necessary background for examining in turn each of these activities.

Mary Molek was born in Chicopee, Kansas, on June 9, 1909, the first child of the Slovene immigrants Franc (Frank) and Lucija (Lucy) Jug (later Anglicized to Jugg). Their second child, a son, died as an infant, but two younger sisters survive Mary. When she was two, the family moved to Mineral, another mining town nearby. Eventually they acquired a small farm which provided supplementary income to her father's wages as a miner. From her parents Mary learned to read Slovene before the age of six.¹ Although she was not exposed to English before entering grade school, she graduated from high school as a valedictorian in 1925, just before her sixteenth birthday. She managed to graduate early because of extra credits earned at Kansas State College in Pittsburg during her last two summers at high school. From the same college, now Pittsburg State University, she earned her bachelor of science degree in 1928.

Education opened to Mary a fruitful career, first in teaching and counseling, and later as a curator. Following her marriage in 1934 in Chicago to Ivan Molek, the editor of the Slovene daily *Prosveta*, she continued her studies at the University of Chicago, earning a master's degree in psychology in 1941, and admittance to the Ph.D. candidacy in 1944. This was also the year in which her husband, a staunch liberal, had to resign his position with *Prosveta* because of his unwillingness to lend unqualified support to the Yugoslav partisan leadership. The move to New York, where Ivan served for two years as editor of Slovene broadcasts on the Voice of America, prevented Mary from completing her doctorate. However, until her husband's death in 1962, she continued with her employment in the public education system. An important change in her career occurred in 1963 with her appointment to the position of curator of the newly-established Immigrant Archives of the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis-St. Paul. In 1969 she moved to Dover, Delaware, to become the first curator of collections in the Eldridge Reeves Memorial Building of the State Museum. She died in Dover on April 3, 1982, and was laid to rest in the Highland Part Cemetery in Pittsburg, Kansas.²

Throughout her life Mary Molek took part in many civic and educational activities extending beyond her immediate professional responsibilities. In 1977 she joined the Society for Slovene Studies. She participated in the Society's annual meeting in Philadelphia, in 1980, with the paper "Louis Adamic: Political Activist." In 1978 she received in New York an award from the League of Slovene Americans for her contribution to Slovene-American literature. On that occasion she delivered a lecture entitled: "Slovenian Heritage: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow."³

Based on available information, Mary Molek's first published writings appeared in *Juvenile*, the English section of *Mladinski list* (Chicago) during the thirties. Slovene translations of two of her poems were recently published in an anthology of Slovene-American authors, *Naši na tujih tleh*. A bio-bibliographical note in that book gives some twenty titles of poems, short stories and sketches that she published in *Juvenile* between 1932 and 1943. Her poems are characterized (p. 522) as "reflective, social, atmospheric and educa-

tional,” while her short stories and sketches are said to “draw upon the life of workers, her own childhood and contemporary civilization.”

After 1943 there followed a long hiatus in Molek’s literary production, which came to an end in 1976 with the publication of *Immigrant Woman*, a book that the author herself described in the introduction as a fictionalized biography of her mother. The work provides insights into the psyche of both immigrants and their offspring. As John Nielsen put it, “We see deeply into the mother, but we see more deeply into the daughter as she writes the book.”⁴ Through the prism of the writer the attitudes of established American society are revealed as well: aspects of the ostracism of the immigrants’ cultural heritage are intermingled with evidence of a helpful attitude at a personal level, such as that of the high school principal who provided encouragement and guidance in the planning of Mary’s education. According to Irene Portis Winner, Molek’s book is “both an artistic document and an acute penetration into the essence of our ever-surprising cultural heritage.”⁵

With the *Immigrant Woman* barely completed, Mary Molek turned her energies to collecting, translating and editing her husband’s writings. Her first project consisted of a bibliography of Ivan Molek’s published work, no small task if we consider that he was the most prolific of Slovene-American writers. It took Mary one year to assemble the data and prepare for publication her *Comprehensive Bibliography of the Literary Works of Ivan (John) Molek*. Two years later, in 1978, she published her own translation of her husband’s *Two Worlds*. The original had appeared with the title *Dva svetova* in Ljubljana in 1932, as the first volume of a trilogy (*Veliko mravljišče*, 1934; *Sesuti stolp*, 1935.) *Two Worlds* is an autobiographic story recounting a young man’s journey to the New World and his American experiences. As her last undertaking, Mary Molek embarked upon translating and annotating the manuscript of Ivan Molek’s memoirs. They were published in 1979 as a massive volume entitled *Slovene Immigrant History, 1900-1950*.

Valuable as the publications which Mary Molek authored and edited may be for students of immigrant history, they are equaled in importance by the Slovene-American archival materials that she helped to preserve. The initial inspiration for this work came from her husband, who collected not only an impressive Slovene library, but preserved documents which came across his desk as editor of *Prosveta* or were obtained through his other contacts. During the early forties he and a few other collectors of Slovene Americana took the initiative for establishing a Slovene ethnic museum in Cleveland. Unfortunately the project failed to materialize because of lack of public support. Many years later Mary Molek, regretting this turn of events, wrote: “Now so much is scattered in so many far-flung corners, and many of them too unstable financially to give them much hope for permanency.”⁶ Even so, it is fair to say that the state of Slovene-American collections today would have been much poorer without her untiring efforts. She saved from disappearance what she could, both privately and as the curator of Immigrant Archives of the University of Minnesota, now the Immigration History Research Center. Professor Timothy L. Smith, who established the archives in 1963, found in Mary Molek an enthusiastic and knowledgeable collaborator. She collected for the Archives a large body of valuable records, ethnic newspapers, and other printed materials. The records obtained from the Slovenska Narodna Podporna Jednota (SNPJ) alone consisted of twenty-eight linear feet of papers and ledgers. In 1976 these records were processed by Joseph Stipanovich and are now contained in 227 folders, including 53 ledger books. The period covered is 1904-1952.

It should be noted that prior to assuming the curatorship of the Immigrant Archives, Mary Molek transferred some 150 titles from her husband’s library to the University of Chicago Library. This collection included the following books: Frederick Baraga, *Abrégé*

de l'histoire des Indiens (Paris, 1837), and *Dushna pasha sa kristjane* (4th. ed., Ljubljana, 1835); *Kranjska čbelica*, vol. 1 (1834 reprint), vol. 4 (1833) and vol. 5 (1848); *Sveta pisma stariga testamanta I* (Japel and Kumerdej edition of 1791); *Svetu pismu stariga testamanta III* (Skriner and Richer edition of 1801); and Valentin Vodnik, *Pismenost ali gramatika* (Ljubljana 1811).

After leaving Minneapolis, Mary Molek retained in her possession a valuable collection of Slovene-American printed materials, ranging from anniversary publications of various Slovene fraternal benefit societies, singing groups and theatrical groups to the programs of events they organized. In 1979 she donated 179 items from this collection to the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies in Philadelphia. The donation was accompanied by a professionally prepared, annotated listing. The remainder of the materials, including a collection of the by-laws of various organizations, was donated to the Chicago Historical Society in 1982, 30 cartons in all. Earlier, Mary Molek had deposited in the Society's collections various printed materials and over 4,500 letters from the Molek collection (1900-1950).

What conclusions can one draw from the life of this remarkable woman, a humanist and intellectual who remained true to the work ethic and the values imparted to her by her Slovene parents? I find no words more fitting than those of Irene Portis Winner, who wrote: "The immigrant woman who bore the daughter who brings to life and makes palpable, in novels and in biography, traditions which do not die, and who, as a scientist, pioneers ethnic archives at universities, demands a new understanding."⁷

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*I am indebted to Ms. Ernestine Judd for valuable comments, items of information, and photographs.

I also wish to thank Professor John P. Nielsen for several newspaper clippings.

1. See Mary Molek, *Immigrant Woman*.
2. See the obituary in *The Morning News* (Wilmington, DE), April 5, 1982, and similar notices in the *State News* (Dover, DE) and the *Evening Journal*.
3. John P. Nielsen, "Mary J. Molek Wins Author Award," *Ameriška Domovina*, December 8, 1978.
4. See Nielsen's review in *Ameriška domovina*, July 21, 1978.
5. See Winner's review in *Society for Slovene Studies Newsletter* 11 (Fall, 1978) 5-6.
6. Letter, Mary Molek to the present author, August 6, 1977.
7. Winner, review of *Immigrant Woman*.

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POVZETEK

Mary Molek se je rodila leta 1909 slovenskima izseljencema Francu in Luciji Jug v rudarski naselbini Chicopee v Kansasu. Diplomirala je iz pedagogike na collegeu v Pittsburgu (Kansas); magisterij iz psihologije je dosegla na University of Chicago. Poklicno je delovala na srednjih šolah, po smrti moža Ivana pa so jo leta 1963 imenovali za glavno arhivarko tedaj ustanovljenega arhiva za priseljence pri University of Minnesota v Minneapolisu. Leta 1969 je postala kustosinja v muzeju države Delaware v Doverju, kjer je leta 1982 umrla.

Z literarnimi prispevki je v tridesetih letih sodelovala pri mladinskem listu slovenskih izseljencev *Juvenile* (Chicago). Leta 1976 je izdala življenjepisni roman o svoji materi z naslovom *Immigrant Woman*. Sledili sta bibliografija objavljenih del Ivana Moleka (1976) in angleški prevod njegove knjige *Dva svetova* (1978). Uredila in izdala je tudi Molekove zapiske o društvenih in političnih dogajanjih med slovenskimi izseljenci, še posebej v času druge svetovne vojne (1979).

Po njeni zaslugi je danes ohranjeno obsežno arhivsko gradivo za študij slovenske izseljenske zgodovine v ustanovah: Immigration History Research Center (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis-St. Paul), Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies (Philadelphia) in Chicago Historical Society.