

## FRANC PIRC AS PEACEMAKER DURING THE SIOUX UPRISING OF 1862

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### 1. A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF FRANC PIRC

The Slovene missionary Franc Pirc (who usually spelled his name 'Francis Pierz' in the United States) was born in Kamnik, Slovenia, on November 20, 1795. In the Fall of 1810 he enrolled in the Seminary in Ljubljana to begin his studies for the priesthood. Three years later, on March 13, 1813, he was ordained by Bishop Kavčič.<sup>1</sup> His theological studies coincided with the existence of the Napoleonic creation of the Illyrian Provinces, which gave him the chance to study French; this later proved very useful to him for communication with some North American Indian tribes. Father Pirc's assignments in the Diocese of Ljubljana were as assistant pastor in Kranjska gora and Fužine, and as pastor in Peče and Podbrezje.<sup>2</sup>

Having seen the economic need of the peasants of Slovenia, Pirc wrote his handbook for fruit growers *Kranjski vrtnar . . .*, published 1830-34.<sup>3</sup> To further help tree-growers, in 1834 he also published a pamphlet, *Podučenje kako se morejo te škodljive gosenice končati*.<sup>4</sup> In appreciation of his great contributions to farming the Kranjska kmetijska družba awarded him a special medal of honor in 1842.<sup>5</sup>

Father Pirc became interested in missionary work in North America through the letters of Frederick Baraga that were published in the *Berichte der Leopoldinen-Stiftung im Kaiserthume Österreich*.<sup>6</sup> Baraga's letters, bursting as they were with zeal, kindled in him the desire to become a missionary and to devote the rest of his life to the welfare of the Indians. When he sailed to the New World in 1835, he was nearly fifty years old.<sup>7</sup>

In the United States, Pirc worked in what became the state of Michigan in 1837, in La Croix (now Cross Village), Sault Ste. Marie, and in Arbre Croche (now Harbor Springs). He also undertook long journeys on Lake Superior.<sup>8</sup>

In 1852 Pirc moved to Minnesota and became one of the greatest pioneers of that state. He established his headquarters at Crow Wing and undertook frequent journeys to outlying villages of the region. Pirc was also known as an ardent supporter of European colonization: deeply disappointed by the Anglo-Saxon treatment of the Indians, he thought that colonists from continental Europe would work for their welfare. In this effort, Pirc became the spiritual father of the first group settlement of colonists from Slovenia, in St. Stephen.<sup>9</sup> In 1855 he published, in St. Louis, Missouri, his book *Die Indianer in Nord-Amerika*.<sup>10</sup>

In the spring of 1853 Father Pirc was for the first time called on to assume the role of peacemaker: he received an urgent message from Father Vivaldi in Long Prairie to hurry there immediately, to help him avert an imminent outbreak of hostilities between two Indian tribes, the Winnebago and the Chippewa. Two Chippewa had been killed by a band of drunken Winnebago, and the Chippewa chief, Attawan, had dispatched a party of braves to avenge their murdered brothers. Pirc, accompanied by a trusted Chippewa guide, covered forty miles and arrived just in time to prevent further bloodshed: being respected by Attawan, he was allowed to act as mediator.<sup>11</sup> This successful intervention was, in fact, good experience for Pirc's mediation in the Sioux Uprising nine years later.



## 2. THE SIOUX UPRISING

The uprising by the Sioux Indians in Minnesota in 1862 has usually been interpreted as savage and inhuman. Historians have depicted the Indian victories as massacres of the whites, and the victory of the whites as a triumph of justice. Although nobody can justify the uprising or the attendant bloodshed, it must however be pointed out that it could have been prevented had the government representatives offered some timely understanding.

No plan existed, indeed, for organized bloodshed. The first incident occurred when four Indian hunters, returning home from an unsuccessful hunt, attacked a homestead and killed five people. At a meeting of Sioux chiefs Little Crow, a young chief, in spite of warnings from others, assumed the leadership of an uprising aimed at restoring hunting grounds to the Indians. The uprising spread quickly through southern Minnesota. Final reports estimated the number of people killed, soldiers and civilians, at about 1400; President Lincoln's estimate was 800. Several thousands of refugees left their homes. The result of the uprising is well known: after a campaign by General Sibley, it was suppressed on September 26, 1862, with disastrous effects for the Sioux. By Presidential order, on December 26 of the same year 38 Indians and mixed-breeds were hanged at Mankato, and hundreds were imprisoned in the military stockade. Originally, indeed, 307 had been condemned by the military tribunal; but Lincoln commuted the death sentence of all but 38.<sup>12</sup>

## 3. THE DISTURBANCES AMONG THE CHIPPEWA

The first day of the Sioux Uprising was also the day when Chippewa braves began to plunder homesteads, in the vicinity of Otter Trail Lake, Leech Lake, and Crow Wing. The Sioux had been trying, with some success, to persuade the Chippewa to join their uprising. A Chippewa chief called Hole-in-the-Day had observed the difficult Civil War situation faced by the Union on a visit to Washington; and, given the recruitment to the Union army in Minnesota, he had concluded that Lincoln's government suffered from weakness. A meeting is reported in the spring of 1862 between Hole-in-the-Day and Little Crow to make combined plans for an uprising.<sup>13</sup>

Father Pirc, then living in Crow Wing, saw with his own eyes Chippewa braves plundering the countryside. He learned that Chief Hole-in-the-Day had refused to meet with McDole, federal Commissioner for Indian Affairs, who had been sent by Lincoln to Fort Ripley to negotiate with the Indians. In view of the gathering storm, Pirc decided to act on his own. He knew that an uprising by the Chippewa would destroy all his successful work among them, since stern governmental counter-measures would be sure to follow. He therefore tried to dissuade 'his' Chippewa, in spite of the attitude of their chiefs, who at first refused his mediation.<sup>14</sup>

Pirc reported on his activity to Europe, proud that 'his converts' had not participated in the uprising. He felt obliged to help all the Indians, including those which were not 'his'. In general, his report reflected the current thinking; and it has remained a document of great importance for the history of Minnesota, as well as reflecting on Pirc's success as a missionary among the Chippewa. This report also indicates that he could speak Chippewa, although he knew no other Amerindian languages. Since few historians have mentioned Pirc's accomplishment, highlights of his report are quoted here.

## 4. FROM FATHER PIRC'S REPORT

Father Pirc reported at length on his peace mission to the Leopoldinen-Stiftung in 1863.



The following are extracts from the report.<sup>15</sup>

“Since much exaggeration and lack of truth were incorporated in the writing of journalists I would like to present a short and true history of the uprising in this country.

For years our poor Chippewa Indians were unmercifully deceived by fur merchants, the majority were corrupted by whisky traders, robbed of their property by dishonest officials and, as rumor has it, incited by Southern rebels through their secret agents. They formed a gang under the leadership of chief Hole-in-the-Day and took from the white settlers over one hundred head of cattle in addition to food and clothing. As far as I know they did not shed any human blood, they caused however tremendous fear and terror. The military and armed white settlers were called in to destroy the savage rebels or to chase them out of the State of Minnesota.

Our good-hearted president immediately sent commissioner Mr. McDole from Washington to offer forgiveness and peace to those who went astray. Instead of going to Crow Wing to make peace, they robbed a house in the vicinity of that town and decided to plunder and burn also the town itself. As soon as I was informed by a friendly Indian about this plan, I took a piece of cloth with tobacco and walked one mile towards the camp of the rebels, located in a dark forest beyond the Mississippi river. Halfway to the camp I met two black-painted riders galloping toward me. They had the order to shoot every white man going that way. I took a handkerchief from my pocket, lifted it, and took several steps away from the path. The riders took a look at me and rode silently away. Soon I reached the first sentry post, numbering about thirty men. They encircled me and asked, ‘Father, where are you going?’ I answered them that I wished to see their chiefs. ‘That is impossible, Father!’ they told me, ‘since no white man is allowed to see them.’ They showed me a line across the path which was not supposed to be crossed by any white man. I laughed and lifted my foot with the words, ‘I am not afraid of your death!’ At that moment four men grabbed me, lifted me, and put me about ten feet across the line, explaining laughingly: ‘Father, you did not cross the line against the order of our chiefs, we have carried you over. You will stay alive!’ Several paces further they showed me another sign with two lines across the path, assuring me that I would certainly lose my life if I continued walking towards the chiefs’ camp. I told them that the chiefs should come to see me if things were like that.”

Pirc further discusses his half-hour speech before the five chiefs, in which he described the dangers for the Indians of an uprising, since several thousand soldiers and groups of angry settlers were ready to destroy them. He advised them to negotiate peace. Persuaded by the missionary, all five Chippewa chiefs voted for peace and refused to join the Sioux in their uprising.

He also mentions the Sioux and their fate, although he never worked among them. In Fort Snelling he preached a sermon to the 1500 Sioux prisoners, among whom were many women and children. He spoke in French and the sermon was translated into Dakota, the language of the Sioux. Pirc then travelled to see General Sibley, Governor of Minnesota, asking for humane treatment of the imprisoned Indians.



With his brave action, Franc Pirc saved at least several hundreds of human lives. At the same time, he saved the Chippewa in Minnesota from the destiny which befell the Sioux. Finally, he contributed to the preservation of the Union, although it is unlikely that Lincoln would have been informed about this lonely peacemaker.

Franc Pirc returned to his homeland in 1873 and died in Ljubljana on January 22, 1880.<sup>16</sup>

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## REFERENCES

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2. William Furlan, *In Charity Unfeigned: the Life of Father Francis Xavier Pierz* (St. Cloud: Diocese of St. Cloud, 1952) 30.
3. In full: *Krajnski Vertnar, ali poduzhenje v' kratkim veliko sadnih dreves sarediti, jih s' zeplenjam poshlahtniti, in lepe verte k' velikim pridu sasaditi* (Ljubljana: Kleinmayr, I: 1830, II: 1834).
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5. Furlan, 33.
6. The extensive bibliography on Bishop Baraga deserves a separate study. See also M. Klemenčič, "Research on Slovene immigration to the United States" in the present volume, reference 7.
7. Furlan, 33.
8. Furlan, 55-181.
9. *Diamond Jubilee of the Dedication of the Church of St. Stephen, 1871-1946* (St. Stephen, MN: 1946); Franc Trdan, *Za božjim klicem* (Kranj: 1939) 17-22; Furlan, 236-237.
10. *Die Indianer in Nord-Amerika, ihre Lebensweise, Sitten, Gebräuche u.s.w.* (St. Louis: Saler, 1855).
11. Furlan, 188-89.
12. William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 1959-69), Vol. II, 208-11.
13. Folwell, 374-82.
14. Furlan, 201-03.
15. Translated from Franz Pierz, "Bericht des Missionärs H. Franz Pierz dd. Crow Wing im Staate Minnesota am 15. April 1863 an die Central-Direktion der Leopoldinen-Stiftung," *Berichte der Leopoldinen-Stiftung im Kaiserthume Österreich*, 5/23 (1863) 29-34. For a full English translation, see Grace McDonald, "Father Francis Pierz, missionary," *Minnesota History* 5/10 (1929) 121-23; for a translation into Slovene, see *Ave Maria Koledar* 1983, 78-81. Pirc also reported the same events to Canon Janez Novak in Ljubljana, see *Zgodnja Danica* 1880, 107, and Hrovat 85-89.
16. Furlan, 239-40.



**POVZETEK**

*Slovenski misijonar Franc Pirc (1785-1880), ki se je rodil v Kamniku, se je odlikoval v domovini ne samo kot duhovnik, ampak tudi kot pisec knjig o sadjarstvu. Po branju poročil Friderika Barage o težavah misijonskega dela pri Indijancih v Severni Ameriki, se je tudi sam odločil za delo v misijonih. V Združene države je prispel v letu 1835 in je deloval v nekaterih krajih v Michiganu in hodil na misijonska potovanja po Gornjem jezeru. V letu 1852 se je preselil v Minnesoto in postal eden največjih pionirjev te države. Iz središča v Crow Wing je obiskoval druge kraje in učil Indijance.*

*Ze v letu 1853 je bil poklican kot posrednik za mir med plemenoma Winnebago in Chippewa. Med uporom plemena Sioux v letu 1862 je Pirc uspešno posredoval pri poglavarjih rodu Chippewa in jih prepričal, da se s svojim rodom niso pridružili upornikom. Med uporom Sioux Indijancev je po poročilih izgubilo življenje 1400 vojakov in civilistov. Posredovanje misijonarja Pirca je rešilo rod Chippewa pred usodo, ki je zadela upornike, od katerih so na povelje predsednika Lincolna 38 obesili, na stotine pa zaprli v pregrade. Proti koncu svojega življenja se je misijonar Pirc vrnil v Slovenijo, kjer je umrl v Ljubljani.*