

PERSPECTIVES ON SLOVENE MIGRATION TO ARGENTINA

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INTRODUCTION

Any analysis involving *perspectives* is speculative. It is vital to recall, first, that the term *perspective* is ambiguous. Not only may a perspective be approached both scientifically and artistically; in addition, there are three essential aspects of any perspective: the projected object, the attitude assumed by the subject (the observer), and the context upon which the perspective projects. An analysis of 'perspectives' in the field of social sciences involves concepts which belong rather to the pure sciences. If man is the performer in a situation, innumerable different historical, cultural and ethnographic circumstances must be considered by the analyst; these do, however, conform to sociological rules.

In this instance, the 'object' of my perspective is Slovene immigration to Argentina; the 'attitude' is that of the daughter of political emigrants; and the 'context' is the Argentine social and geographical environment. Within these limitations, I attempt, as objectively as possible, to describe and make predictions about the future of the Slovene community in Argentina.

Any such analysis must first refer to some of the main historical features of the Slovene migration to that country; for only these objective data will make it possible to talk about future possibilities and developments. It should be pointed out that among Argentinian Slovenes there are, unfortunately, no professional or specialized sociologists; furthermore, systematic statistics have never been collected with respect to Slovene immigration, and thorough research into the members of the Slovene community in Argentina, and their degree of participation in community life, has been lacking. My conclusions here are based on reading Argentinian Slovene records and newspapers, on direct observations, and also on the responses given by students taking courses at the Slovene High School in Buenos Aires.

IMMIGRATION PERIODS AND IMMIGRANT GROUPS

It is a historical fact that more Slovenes migrated to Argentina than to any other Latin American country. In Argentine Slovene migration history, there are three main periods: (1) the 19th Century, i.e., when Slovenia was still part of the Austrian Empire; (2) the interwar period, especially the years after 1922, which involved emigrants fleeing Fascist persecution, (although the search for material advancement also played a role); and (3) the period since the Second World War, when emigrants, for various (political, religious or ideological) reasons, either through compulsion or by personal preference, left Communist Yugoslavia. Argentinian Slovenes belong, in general, to these three corresponding immigrant groups, although there are of course a number with mixed allegiance.

The first immigration left, as traces, just a few Slovene surnames, mostly in vestigial form (this would without doubt be an interesting subject of analysis, both for Argentina and for Slovenia); there are scarcely any cultural remnants to be found in any parts of the country.

The second immigration, with its diverse regional origins in Slovenia, still maintains a number of relatively simple social and folkloric cultural activities; these are held, without any great local differentiation, in the various *Dom Triglav* clubs, which were founded by

Slovenes and other Yugoslavs. (Incidentally, in these centers more recent immigrants still discuss old political problems, putting forward Soviet Russian, Titoist Yugoslav and more nationalistic Slovene views. Also, new folkloric and other cultural ties with Yugoslavia have been made in recent years.)

Between members of the second and the third immigrations there is an appreciable gap: this is due to the disparities in political opinions, and, it may be suggested, to prejudices also. (This striking circumstance is in fact nothing new: let us recall, for instance, the disparity between the two waves of German and Spanish emigrants to Argentina, before and during the Second World War). Today, even though the two groups have become mixed, the gap between them is still evident; and, although not acrimonious, it is nevertheless decisive.

The third, modern, immigration has its own vitality, and represents the core of the Slovene community. It is the most dynamic of the three immigrations, with direct sentimental links to its homeland and immediate interest in contemporary politics in Slovenia; its ideological viewpoint, which is normally critical of the régime, must be accepted as a fact of life.

An analysis of the membership of the third immigration, based on personal observations, especially of generational differences, results in a classification into three groups:

First, those who took an active part in the Second World War: an age-group that at present ranges between 65 and 80. These are the immigrants who, upon their arrival, became the leaders in their communities in all aspects of life: religious, cultural, social, and political. These immigrants have proved very influential; therefore, by looking at the background from which this group came, by observing their world view and their aspirations, we can better understand the philosophy of the subsequent age-groups.

Second, those of the following age-group, now aged 50-65, who actively helped the members of the first group; these took an active part in community organizations, managed community activities, and governed the institutional aspects of community life.

Third, the youngest age-group: those who left their homeland as children, or who were born in refugee camps in Italy or Austria. It was this group which found it most difficult to compromise between the competing demands on ethnic allegiance; and hence it was this group which became most subject to assimilation, i.e., to 'Argentinization'. In many cases, members of this group became separated from other Slovenes, and returned to the community only in a spectator role, when their children enrolled in Slovene Saturday schools.

Chronologically parallel to these three groups of the third immigration, there are members of the Slovene community, such as myself, who were born in Argentina: i.e., second- and third-generation Argentinian Slovenes, with, among the former, some differentiation between those born before 1960 and those born after that year.

FACTORS INVOLVED IN THE MAINTENANCE OF ETHNICITY

The importance of education for a community such as the Argentine Slovenes must be emphasized. During the first years away from the homeland, when the desire to return home was still strong, and the emigration appeared just a temporary misfortune, Slovene schools represented the idea of continuity, of an attachment to the standards of the homeland. Community members, therefore, who participated in this educational venture, especially in its initial stages, maintained a strong sense of loyalty to their Slovene nationality; indeed, it was considered a severe mistake for anyone to marry a member of another ethnic group. Social pressures of this kind, both real or assumed, forced some members out of the Slovene community.

Second- and third-generation Slovenes in Argentina, on the other hand, have to deal with an educational conflict; in particular, they have to deal with the so-called 'two homeland' problem: conflicting allegiances to the land of origin and to the land of adoption. Their Argentine educational background, the degree to which their parents have adapted to the new society, and other social factors all play a role. Moreover, this conflict takes place within the framework of the Argentine State's search for identity, which has to compromise among ethnographic differences, struggles between social classes, cultural disparities, the rapid urbanization of rural populations, and political opportunism.

At present, Slovene primary schools are becoming filled either with second-generation students of mixed (Slovene and non-Slovene) parentage, or with third-generation Slovenes. The privileged position of foreigners and of certain immigrant groups in the Argentine middle class, encourages foreign cultural values.

In Argentina today, Slovenes have fourteen primary and three secondary courses in their Saturday schools. There is one important cultural organization, *Slovenska kulturna akcija*, with two regular publications: a bulletin, *Glas kulturne akcije*, and a magazine, *Meddobje*. The *Slovenska hiša* in Buenos Aires is the center of many organizational groups (youth, student, political, religious, and so on); it also houses the editorial direction of two magazines: *Duhovno življenje*, with its children's supplement *Božje stezice*, and the political weekly *Svobodna Slovenija*.

There are many reasons why young men and women visit the Slovene cultural centers: for social contacts; to pursue their own cultural interests; with nationalistic or political aims in mind; or even from force of habit. Nevertheless, these ethnically-conscious younger members of the Slovene community, having been born in Argentina, still share some aspects of the outlook of those of their contemporaries who have gradually lost contact with their community and, so to speak, 'have become lost in the Argentine sea.' In particular, they have in common one attitude to their Slovene-ness: they share a realistic acceptance of the fact that they belong to an émigré community. They no longer believe in an idealized continuity of Slovene life in Argentina, or in the idea that the emigration might be a temporary one. Somewhat paradoxically, their own relationship with their parents' homeland has become closer than that of their parents, since many of them have made visits to Slovenia, have become involved with exchanges with Slovene groups and in personal contacts with people from Slovenia, and have become more interested in Slovene political and cultural life.

Never before was the Slovene world so conscious of its territorial realities, namely, the homeland; the minority areas in Italy and Austria; and the various emigrant communities. These realities have strengthened both the sense of belonging to a particular location, and the search for a common experience. Moreover, it is understood that it is impossible to have a Slovene cultural life of one's own without taking into account what has been so well stated by Josef Velikonja, that even for the Third Slovenia (namely, emigrants and their descendants) the only real homeland is Slovenia, the land of Slovene people, Slovene culture, and Slovene creativity.¹

However original any cultural phenomenon may be, however truly 'Slovene' it may be in essence, the Slovene elements in it will continue to diminish gradually as generation succeeds generation in Argentina. The youngest generation—those aged between 15 and 25—have expressed a keen need for regular contacts with the homeland of their ancestors, so that they can appreciate the sense of Slovene-ness within the European context. There is however a feeling that obstacles to cultural exchanges originate in Yugoslavia.

Members of the youngest generation of Slovenes in Argentina find themselves in conflict situations. General social processes often clash with personal cultural decisions. Many within this sector of the community have been assimilated to the Argentine environment to a considerable degree, in spite of the limited possibilities of commercial and economic advancement. At the same time, when they visit Slovene cultural centers, they express a sense of belonging, of continuation of their parents' customs and ideas; they often speak about national duty, about a mission that they feel obliged to perform, even about liabilities and responsibilities to their forefathers and to their homeland. In general, members of the younger generations have shown an increased interest in cultural participation in recent years.

The common phenomenon observed in all emigrant communities—that new generations are born unable to express themselves literarily in the native language of the homeland—is also apparent in Argentina; however, there are fortunately in Buenos Aires such writers as Andrej Rot, Pavle Fajdiga and Andrej Fink, who play an active role in the Slovene community. Among writers, there appears to be no difference among the generations, as far as basic ideology is concerned; there is on the other hand an appreciable difference in outlook between those born in Argentina and those who were not, in that the former have a stronger interest in local politics, and have less of a involvement in events in Slovenia.

The search for one's own identity and for a sense of belonging to a State is, for Slovenes in Argentina, exceptionally difficult, because the Argentine society is changing, unstable, and lacks perspectives on the future. This would appear to be one reason why integration ('Argentinization') is relatively slow. The younger generations, in their attempt to identify ideational principles linked to their homeland or the homeland of their parents, feel that just visiting Slovene cultural centers and participating in their cultural activities is not enough; they believe that the link with the community should be a more dynamic, tangible one. For this reason, they wish to assimilate Slovene culture to a greater extent.

The 'two homelands' conflict—the desire to share the Argentine daily reality and at the same time maintain contact with the heritage from a country 12,000 kilometers away—is exceptionally demanding. I suggest that this conflict can be resolved, and life for Slovene Argentinians can be made more pleasant, if there is a frank dialogue, and more cultural exchanges, among Slovenes.

To summarize: Slovene immigration to Argentina has in many respects followed the usual pattern, given the conflicting demands and the varying circumstances. The existence of a large number of educated, well-qualified, and enthusiastic young men and women, with a strong attachment to the Slovene homeland, allows us to expect that there will be many generations of Argentine Slovenes who will maintain a pride in their Slovene heritage.

Buenos Aires

REFERENCE

1. Josef Velikonja, "Kje, domovina, si?" *Draga *84* (Trieste: Društvo slovenskih izobražencev, 1985) 21.

POVZETEK

Izseljevanje slovenskih ljudi v Argentino je mogoče deliti v tri važnejša obdobja: devetnajsto stoletje, čas med obema vojnama in leta po drugi svetovni vojni. Od teh treh obdobj je prvo pustilo le malo sledov, med tem ko so sledovi drugega dokaj prisotni v oblikah kulturnega delovanja slovenske skupnosti v Argentini danes. Večji del referata je posvečen tretjemu valu priseljevanja po drugi svetovni vojni. Ta val danes sestoji iz treh starostnih skupin, ki jih referentka obravnava po njihovem odnosu do jezika in etnične zavesti. Ob koncu referata je podan pregled vzgojnih, družbenih in političnih faktorjev, ki vplivajo na ohranjanje slovenske etničnosti v Argentini.