

## THE SLOVENE IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY IN ARGENTINA BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

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The study of the Slovene diaspora in Argentina (and in the countries of the 'green continent' in general) has been much neglected in comparison with the study of Slovenes in other parts of the world. It has not been the topic of any but the most preliminary discussions at symposia, and only recently has it been seriously treated in the literature, both from different disciplinary viewpoints and as a whole.<sup>1</sup> It is thus appropriate on this occasion to discuss the most distinct Slovene community in the world, a community created out of the fateful political circumstances of 20th-century Europe. This study concerns two groups of Slovene political emigrants, mostly concentrated in one of the largest world metropolises, Buenos Aires, and will attempt to highlight some of the features of the pre-World War II community there. It is hoped that it will serve, in some measure, to illuminate a subject that until recently was known only through the popular and semi-professional writings of individuals active in this community.

The first known contacts of Slovenes with South America are in the second half of the 19th century. Among the various groups of immigrants from the Hapsburg Monarchy to be encouraged by the Argentine authorities to settle in the vast agrarian hinterlands of that spacious country were also Slovenes from the Littoral (Primorsko). Between 1876 and 1910 the Slovene immigration to South America accounted for only 10% of the total from the Austrian Empire.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Slovene immigration to that continent through World War I was insignificant in comparison to the mass Slovene immigrations of the period to the United States.

The large-scale immigration of Slovenes to Argentina is closely connected with the well-known 'exodus' of the population of the Littoral. This began a few years after World War I, when the border established by the 1920 Rapallo Treaty separated these people from their ethnic center, and when the Fascist government would not allow them the basic rights of ethnic development. The emigration from the Littoral increased, in particular, with the march of the 'black shirts' on Rome in 1922, and reached its peak at the end of the twenties, when the Slovene population in the area lost all its political and cultural rights.

According to official Italian statistics, 10,989 Slovenes emigrated to Argentina from the Slovene parts of the Julian Province between 1926 and 1934. The actual number of emigrants was higher than this, for many left without permission from the authorities, even though such permits were easy to obtain.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in line with its denationalization policy, the Fascist government favored and fully supported this emigration. The extent of the Slovene emigration to Argentina may also be seen through a comparison of the number of immigrants to that country from the Drava Province (i.e., Slovenia) with the number from Yugoslavia as a whole. From the former, in the period 1919-1939 only 3,197 emigrated, and 1,078 returned, giving a net total of 2,119. From Yugoslavia in the same period, the net emigrant total amounted to 29,412 (44,396 emigrants and 14,984 registered returnees).<sup>4</sup> According to official Argentine data, a net total of 33,325 Yugoslavs (56,053 immigrants and 22,728 returnees) immigrated between 1920 and 1940.<sup>5</sup> These latter figures exclude the approximately 30,000 Slovenes and Croatians from the territory which then belonged to Italy.

During the Great Depression the flow of immigrants to Argentina dropped significantly, and it came to a complete halt with the events that plunged the world into World War II.

The mass immigration of the 1920s, along with the subsequent arrivals of immigrants' family members, had however reinforced the Argentine Slovene community, which just before World War II totalled over 20,000. The core of this community was in Buenos Aires: at first, in the La Paternal quarter; later in Villa Devoto and Saavedra.

Most of the Slovene migrants from the Littoral were laborers and peasant farmers from Trst/Trieste, Gorica/Gorizia, Goriška Brda, and the Vipava valley; and most were young men inflamed with an intense hatred of Fascism. Many of them had been the victims of persecution by the Fascist police and the *squadroni* for their activities in Slovene workers' and cultural organizations, and had seen the destruction of personal property, and of the libraries and the inventories of the associations which, in the early 1920s, functioned within the framework of the organizations *Ljudski oder* and *Prosveta*. These people, forced out into the world by Fascism, felt like refugees rather than emigrants. As the editor of the cultural review *Njiva* wrote,

“We sometimes read how many Slovenes have been lured abroad by their passion for riches. Perhaps there are some exceptions, but the truth is that the majority of us Slovenes from Italy emigrated because foreigners at home refused us even the slightest bit of freedom or bread, which we had always known how to earn ourselves. That is the real reason why so many of us Slovenes from the Littoral emigrated. Whoever thinks otherwise, and compares the pre-war Slovene emigration to North America with our emigration, is politically illiterate. We emigrated during the period of our greatest humiliation and oppression; that is why we are more like refugees than emigrants.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, this emigration of Slovenes from the Littoral constitutes one of the largest political emigrations in the history of the Slovene diaspora.

The very reason for this ‘mass exile’ of Littoral Slovenes influenced the forms of their ties and interrelationships and the way in which their own institutional networks were built up. Moreover, upon their arrival in Argentina these immigrants found no Slovene organizations, for their predecessors from the Austrian Monarchy were scattered throughout the country; only a few individuals among them were involved in the political organization *Jugoslovenska narodna obrana* which, in the early years of World War I and also later, had made significant contributions to the establishment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.<sup>7</sup>

As early as 1925, in their new immigrant colony in La Paternal, Slovene workers from the Littoral founded their cultural association *Ljudski oder*, modeled after the now-disbanded *Ljudski oder* of their homeland. This, their first, association was founded with the purpose of “. . . offering Slovene, Croatian and Serbian workers and farmers the opportunity to enjoy spiritual education through libraries, the press, singing, music, drama, and especially though lectures and discussions.”<sup>8</sup> Its board was dominated by a group of communists who had joined the newly-founded Communist Party of Argentina and the Union Movement immediately after their arrival. The dissemination of their ideas, and the general mobilization of the new Slovene settlements within the spirit of the workers' ideas, was also greatly enhanced by the appearance of various periodicals at the end of the 1920s and in the early 1930s, such as *Delavski list* (1928-30), *Borba* (1930-34), *Delavski glas* (1931-34), and in particular the workers' cultural review *Njiva* (1937-43).<sup>8</sup>

Due to the ideas which infiltrated the organization with the advent of proletarian internationalism, it became subject to constant scrutiny by the police. Conditions grew especially bad after 1930, when the economic recession placed even greater constraints upon the organization, and when police pressure increased with the dictatorship of General

Uriburu. *Ljudski oder*, for instance, which had, with its band, choir, drama club and library, made a considerable contribution in the cultural field, was closed down many times; its property was burned; and, many a night, its executive and other active members were taken to jails in Villa Devoto.<sup>10</sup> These difficult conditions became even worse in the mid-thirties with the initiation of a real Argentine crusade against communism and the union movement. False information provided by the Yugoslav and Italian Embassies in Argentina also contributed substantially to the persecution of the workers' organizations.

Apart from branches of *Ljudski oder* in Daraguerra, Berisso and Cordoba, the following were also founded in the early thirties: the educational society *Prosveta*, with its branches (numbered I, II, III), and the workers' association *Triglav* in Rosario. Later, various schools and benefit societies were also founded. In view of subsequent developments the most important of these was the 'sokol' (athletic society) *La Paternal*; it was from this that the society *Tabor*, known for its cultural and educational activities, emerged in 1934. In 1938 *Tabor* merged with *Prosveta I* to form *Slovenski dom*. Meanwhile, in 1935, the financial association *Gospodarsko podporno društvo Slovencev* was founded in Villa Devoto.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from these organizations, various school programs, institutions and newspapers were also developed. Among the numerous workers' newspapers, which appeared sporadically, one deserves especial mention: *Gospodarstvo*, which began circulation as early as 1926 and was devoted mainly to the dissemination of financial news. It was edited by the engineer Ciril Jekovec, a member of the *Jugoslovenska narodna odbrana*; it was published in Spanish, Serbo-Croatian and Slovene until the early thirties, when economic constraints forced its closure.

In the early thirties *Slovenski tednik* also appeared; though it originated in liberal circles, after 1933 it became increasingly characterized by left-wing writing, especially during the editorship of Jan Kacin. Since the newspaper took a stand against Yugoslavia, its circulation was prohibited in the homeland.<sup>12</sup> Among the periodicals which supported Monarchist Yugoslavia was the weekly *Novi list*, edited by Viktor Kjuder, which began circulation on 13 September 1936 with the help of a consortium, the president of which was the well-known architect Viktor Sulčič. The paper was supported by a small group of intellectuals and various school organizations. After the arrival of Izidor Cankar in Buenos Aires as the Royal Ambassador to Argentina (a post he held from 1936 to 1942), a merger took place (4 January 1937) of *Slovenski tednik*, *Novi list* and *Slovenski list*. In close co-operation with the embassy, it was guided by a single concept: it related events in Yugoslavia to the Slovene colony following the principle: 'Governments change, but the Monarchy remains.'

With Cankar's arrival, conflicts among the various immigrant groups were resolved, at least as far as community activities were concerned. The new ambassador supported the school programs and made provisions for their official recognition by the Argentine authorities; he was responsible for the fact that a "Yugoslav Radio Hour" was set up in 1938; and, a year later, he placed the cornerstone of the "Yugoslav Home" building at Doc Sud.<sup>13</sup> Although he associated a great deal with the immigrants he avoided the workers' societies, especially *Ljudski oder*; this was very much resented by its members.<sup>14</sup>

Besides the above-mentioned institutions, which were the mainstays of the Slovene community's life and activities, we should also note the important role played by the Slovene clergy, with their use of Slovene in their services. For the immigrants from the Littoral this was extremely important, since the Fascist state at home had severely limited the activities of the Slovene-speaking priests, who had remained bastions of 'Slovenhood'

throughout and had been persecuted for that reason. In *Novi list* there was a special column devoted to the religious life of the Slovenes; and later the review *Duhovno življenje* appeared, edited by Janez Hladnik.

All of this testifies to the intense and dynamic development of the Slovene diaspora in Argentina in the years prior to World War II. The opinions and beliefs of the immigrants remained unchanged from what they been at home. Some were content with the mere fact that they could still sing and talk in their native language in Yugoslavia. For the politically less conscioius, the Yugoslav Monarchy was considered just. Undoubtedly, all the immigrants were anti-Fascist; however, any progressive ideas and revolutionary changes (in Yugoslavia or elsewhere) signified for them an unnecessary preoccupation with politics.<sup>15</sup>

Due to the above-mentioned ideological differences the various immigrant organizations in Argentina often came into mutual conflict, and often carried on polemical discussions in their press. By the end of the thirties the Slovene community somehow became divided into three major camps:

The first and largest was centered round the *Ljudski oder* and the so-called "Inter-Society Board" of the workers' organizations. Its organ was the monthly review *Njiva*. Within this camp, the Marxist-oriented section of the immigrants was highly active; they followed the political struggle in the homeland with great interest, and often identified themselves as an integral part of the Yugoslav working class. They were in close contact with like-minded people in Uruguay (the *Ivan Cankar* and *Slovenski krožek* societies) and Brazil (the *Ornus* society). Through their own newspapers, *Prosveta*, *Proletarec*, *Nova doba*, *Cankarjev glasnik* and *Naprej*, they learned about conditions of immigrants in North America. These publications most of all recommended the workers' paper *Naprej* to their readers.<sup>16</sup>

The second camp formed itself around the *Slovenski dom* and the newspaper *Slovenski list*. The political views of this group were guided by a group of intellectuals, based on a small number of Liberals and Christian Democrats. They enjoyed the support of the Yugoslav embassy and of Cankar himself. The Slovene clergy cooperated with this group too, through their periodical *Duhovno življenje* and through the nuns involved in teaching the Slovene language.<sup>17</sup>

Somewhere in between these two extremes were organizations which concerned themselves with benefit and economic activities, such as the Economic Benefit Organization *Naš dom* in Villa Devoto, and the Yugoslav organization *Samopomoč Slovencev* (also called the *Kranjsko društvo* because its members were mostly from the Drava Province). This group did not however represent a majority; and it could neither mediate between the other two groups nor unite the Slovene immigrants (either in the country as a whole, or just in the capital) in one strong organization.<sup>18</sup> Here we must emphasize that the common, profound hatred for Fascism did sometimes help to unite the community: for instance, on the occasion of the erection of the memorial to the "Bazovica Victims" (Marušica, Bidovec, Miloš and Valenčič) and other victims of Fascism.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, in the period shortly before World War II the Slovene diaspora in Argentina was divided among a number of organizations which, despite their common anti-Fascist nature, differed politically, ideologically, and in the orientation of their activities. Within the community no single organization had more than a few hundred members; for this reason alone, the situation in Argentina was not comparable to that of Slovene immigrants in North America. The Argentine Slovenes were in a very unenviable economic, social and political position. The majority were poor workers and small tradesmen, and their organizations were, economically speaking, extremely modest also. At times, the newspapers could hardly be published. Above all, the Argentine authorities were not in favor of worker- and

anti-Fascist-oriented immigrants. In addition, the divisions among the immigrants were in some ways abetted by the Yugoslav diplomats, whose practices did not lag far behind those from Italy. It was precisely these divisions among the immigrants that made their already difficult position even harder to bear.

Some of the organizations found their feet financially only in the second half of the thirties, after the end of the Great Depression, which greatly affected Argentina and its new immigrants from Europe. These organizations succeeded in building their 'homes' only just before the War. It was about this time that Ambassador Cankar succeeded in uniting parts of the Yugoslav community that supported the Monarchy; he also (cf. above) helped to strengthen the Slovene press (*Naša sloga*, *Slovenski list*), as well as to officially resolve educational questions with the Argentine government.

Recent studies have shown that, due to the prevailing deeply-held anti-Fascist sentiments, the majority in the community sympathized with workers' associations such as *Ljudski oder*. The community supported the organization in its more than fifteen-year struggle for workers' rights and against Fascism; this decisively influenced the orientation of the immigrants during the War, when they clearly supported the National Liberation Struggle of the Yugoslav nations. This support was manifested within the framework of the organizations *Svobodna Jugoslavija* and (later) *Komisija za koordinacijo pomoči Jugoslaviji*. The joint political representation and furnishing of material aid to Yugoslavia, under the auspices of these political and humanitarian institutions, together with the enthusiasm for the downfall of Fascism, helped to unite all the Slovene organizations under one newly-formed organization, the *Slovenski dom*. Shortly afterwards, however, the community was once again split, this time by the Cominform Resolution. The final blow came with the rise of the Peron government, which in 1949 disbanded the organizations associated with the *Slovanska zveza (Union Eslava)*.<sup>20</sup>

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Abbreviation: SIK = Slovenska izseljenska matica, Ljubljana.

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  19. The first fund-raising event for aid to Slovene and Croatian victims of Fascism was initiated by the *Jugoslovanski patronat za pomoč žrtvam evropskega fašizma* and organized by the “Meddruštveni odbor” of the following Slovene organizations: *Ljudski oder*, *Naš dom*, and *Tabor*. The event was attended by, among others, Pavel Golja, Slovene writers’ representative at the International PEN-Clubs Congress, which was taking place in Buenos Aires at the time.
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## POVZETEK

*V prispevku avtor obravnava socialno in politično zgodovino slovenske diaspore v Argentini med obema vojnama. Njen nastanek ter smeri njenega razvoja so v tesni povezanosti z znanim odhajanjem slovenskega življa iz Primorske, potem ko jih je krivična rapalska meja oddvojila od etnične matice in ko jim je fašizem odrekel osnovne pravice, da se na svoji zemlji razvijajo kot narod. Omenjeni vzroki so bistveno vplivali, da se je slovenska diaspora v Argentini organizirala v smislu politične emigracije. S tem v zvezi avtor prikaže razvoj posameznih institucij diaspore, med kateri zavzemajo osrednje mesto tiste, ki so se razvile v okviru delavske naselbine v Buenos Airesu (posamezna društva in emigrantski tisk). Ugotavlja, da je največji del naselbine zaradi iskrenega protifašizma sledil politiki ‘Ljudskega odra’. Prav tako pa posredno nakaže, da je njihov težaven položaj v diaspori pogojevala razdvojenost med državno in etično pripadnostjo njenih udov.*