

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SLOVENE PRESS IN AUSTRALIA: A SHORT HISTORY OF *VESTNIK*, 1955-1987

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THE SLOVENE COMMUNITY IN MELBOURNE BEFORE 1955

To understand the reasons for the creation of the Slovene publication *Vestnik* and its subsequent development, it is necessary first to examine the history of Slovene settlement in Melbourne. This is because it was produced as a direct result of the establishment of the "Slovenski Klub Melbourne" and answered the needs of this club's members.

Slovene immigrants had already been living in Australia for many years prior to the post-World War II mass migration program; but they were few in number, and consequently it is very likely that no Slovene periodical was in circulation in Australia during the first half of the present century.

The Slovenes who were responsible for the creation of *Vestnik* immigrated to Australia in the early years following the end of the Second World War. The majority of these individuals were political refugees. These early Slovene immigrants were initially allotted living quarters in the immigrants' hostels that had been set up specifically for the large influx of new settlers from Europe. Bonegilla, situated near the New South Wales border, was one such place where many Slovenes lived at first. Once suitable employment was found, namely in Melbourne, private accommodation was sought. This often meant that people would rent rooms with other families, or with relatives. As their economic prospects improved, Slovenes began to buy blocks of land, or to buy their first homes ready-built; these were for the most part situated in the outer northern and western suburbs of Melbourne.

A strong feeling of alienation was present among this group of immigrants. Many Slovenes arrived in Australia in isolated groups, and few were able to communicate in the English language. A desire to congregate was thus an important characteristic of these new settlers. It was through the Catholic Church that the first formal gatherings of the Slovenes took place. Slovene migrants to Melbourne originally had their religious services held in the church of St. Carthage, which was located in the inner suburb of Parkville. The Slovene friar Fr. Claude Okorn would travel here from Sydney to celebrate Mass in the Slovene language. Although at first only about 25-30 people attended, increasing numbers of Slovenes became attracted to these services, for their social as well as for their religious opportunities.

Vestnik was not the first Slovene-language publication to be produced in Australia. Already in 1952 *Misli*, the religious and cultural periodical produced by the Slovene Franciscan Friars, was in circulation.

The idea of establishing a Slovene social club that was not attached to the church was initiated by a series of charity dances, held in the town hall of the Melbourne suburb of Kensington, to raise funds in support of *Misli*. After this, an informal Slovene club began to evolve. At first, committee meetings were held on a casual basis in different members' homes. Attendance at these meetings, and the frequency of the social gatherings, began to increase steadily. As a result, rooms were formally hired, both at the cinema in Russell Street and at the Railway Institute at Flinders Street Station.

During the second half of 1954 a meeting to form the "Slovenski Klub Melbourne"¹ was held in the outer western suburb of St. Albans; there were 52 in attendance. It was following

this inaugural event that *Vestnik* was created.

THE HISTORY OF VESTNIK

In September 1955, approximately eight months after the formation of the "Slovenski Klub Melbourne" [henceforward, *SKM*], the first issue of *Vestnik* appeared. It bore the sub-heading "Slovenskega Kluba v Melbournu." This provides a clue to its purpose at that time: it began as a club newsletter. From these beginnings until 1987, this publication has provided a constantly-developing account of the history of Slovene settlers, and their clubs, in the State of Victoria.² In particular, it has reflected the development of *SKM*, the oldest Slovene social club in Melbourne.

From the first months following the establishment of the *SKM* there were already signs of the need for better communication with its members, and for these members to be able to become better acquainted with each other, to reduce the feelings of isolation in the community. There was also a perceived desire for a non-religious Slovene-language publication to be made available that would contain club news and would advertize club events. *SKM* committee members eventually concluded that they would produce their own publication to provide this information to members living in the two largest cities, Melbourne and Geelong. The honorary task of compiling *Vestnik* was entrusted to the club's two secretaries. Its beginnings were extremely modest, for the club had very limited financial resources at that time. Thus only the cheapest and most primitive duplicating machine was purchased. Both secretaries, Marijan Peršič and Zlatko Rome, were initially made responsible for the publication. Peršič was put in charge of content, while Rome was allotted the task of technical production. Both had to prepare the stencils, and also transport the duplicating machine on a monthly basis to a gift shop owned by a fellow Slovene, Eddie Polajnar. Here the printing was carried out, often very late at night.

The first issue of *Vestnik* bears no resemblance to the issues that are printed today. It was completely typewritten, and duplicated on a Roneo machine. It was thus very similar to the kind of publication first produced by refugees who were Displaced Persons from Poland and the Baltic countries. With *Vestnik* there was no immediate attempt at visual appeal; the conveyance of information was regarded as being of paramount importance.

The first issue contained four pages. All of page one was devoted to a detailed editorial welcoming the reader to the first issue. The role and objectives of the publication were here made manifest, the most important statement being:

"*Vestnik* ni časopis³ ki bi Vam vsiljeval to ali ono mišljenje, ki bi hotel s kom tekmovati in mu odvzeti naročnike; . . . Namenjen je naši družini v Melbournu in Viktoriji."

This pledge, to be non-political, was probably the most important reason why the publication survived for so long. Political bias was considered non-productive and inhibitive; indeed, such a bias would have encouraged unnecessary conflict. Moreover, in this editorial statement, *Vestnik*'s creators were trying to convey the message that it had no intention of posing as a rival for *Misli*: it did not want to compete in the religious or cultural spheres. Instead, *Vestnik* was aimed at being a supplementary publication for Slovenes living in Victoria.

Vestnik began as a monthly publication and has continued as such ever since. As for funding: the first issue stated that it would be distributed free, whereas paper and other printing costs would be paid for through advertizing. There were only five advertisements in the first issue, all of them from self-employed Slovenes. This feature of advertising by

Slovene individuals continued through subsequent issues of the publication. *Vestnik* has never relied much on advertising from the non-Slovene community, although some such advertisements have been printed in recent issues.

The contents of the first issue of *Vestnik* reveal the types of concerns that Slovenes had during the mid-1950s. It included articles on the establishment of a choir and a library; a plea for ideas from readers; appeals to increase awareness and hence the readership of the publication; and a piece on the need for sewing Slovene national costumes, to improve the public image of the community. In addition, there were club advertisements for a dance, for a motoring club, and for a drama group.

As the committee members of the *SKM* were regularly changing by annual elections, so too were the club secretaries. Each new secretary automatically took on the responsibility for producing *Vestnik*; each new secretary tried to improve it in terms of artistic layout and literary content. The improvements in the overall format were also fostered by increases in the numbers of subscribers.

In the June 1957 issue the front cover included a screen print in red ink on blue paper, depicting a religious mother-and-child scene. In the late 1950s, illustrations appeared more frequently, also as supplements to articles. In the Christmas and Easter issues religious scenes were dominant. Shorter articles were frequently decorated with hearts, flowers, and cartoons. Headings became more imaginative, and the contents now began to include traditional works by 18th and 19th-century Slovene poets; recipes; short historical pieces about Slovenia; and some short stories. Club news however remained in the forefront.

The frequent changes in *Vestnik*'s address demonstrate the secretarial changes that were taking place. The publication was now being produced at the private homes, either of the secretaries, or of other club members.

By September 1957 an editor for the now enlarged *Vestnik* was appointed. This was Marijan Oppelt, who at the time was also the club's president. The amount of information being incorporated into each issue had increased to such an extent that it became necessary to have an editor to decide on the contents of each issue: the editing was performed by the club's presidents, who changed with each election. The appointment of an editor illustrated the fact that *Vestnik* was developing from a club newsletter into something more like a newspaper.

Although it was still being duplicated as late as 1962, by September 1957 it was being produced with an official letterhead incorporating the bilingual sub-heading "Federation of Slovenian Clubs/Zveza Slovenskih Klubov." The publication's expansion was already in progress. This particular letterhead remained in use until July 1961.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the publication's contents were much preoccupied with outlining for its readers the club's plans for building a home for its members. Hopes of purchasing government land in the prestigious suburb of Albert Park for the construction of a club house were reported in great depth. Even the structure's proposed plans were included. Unfortunately, this project did not come to fruition. In its place, a bluestone-and-brick early-20th century style house was bought in the inner northern suburb of Princess Hill. This center became known to its members as *Dom*. It had been purchased entirely with funds raised by the club and its members. *Vestnik* was aiming to instil in its readers strong feelings of ethnic pride and support for the *Dom* with the following statement in its issue of August 1960: "*Dom* je naš prvi najizrazitejši in največji tempelj narodne zavesti—izraz nas samih!" The subsequent issues were dominated by news of the *Dom* and of events taking place there. By means of vivid full-page advertisements Slovenes were encouraged to visit the center as often as possible.

Between August 1961 and December 1962 *Vestnik* was being produced in virtually the same format as *Misli*; although smaller in size,⁴ it had similar front and back covers made from colored card. *Vestnik* was now adopting an appearance more like that of a magazine.

On the cover of the issue of September 1961 the first photograph appeared, depicting a section of the upper facade of the *Dom*. Since they were less expensive and easier to print, linocut and woodcut illustrations of the Slovene homeland, and of idyllic scenes of ordinary Slovene life, occupied most of the other covers during 1961 and 1962.

In January 1963, when J. Kapušin was editor and K. Kodrič assistant editor, the publication appeared for the first time as a printed tabloid. Unlike their predecessors, both Kapušin and Kodrič had emigrated to Australia many years after the period of refugee emigration. Their own particular backgrounds began to be noticeable in the contents of the publication; the changes they introduced eventually led to a conflict between them and the *SKM*. First, they changed its title, to *Slovenski vestnik*, with the sub-title "Slovene Newspaper in Australia." (It should be noted that at this stage *Vestnik* had not been acknowledged as a national periodical.) Second, they increased the amount of contemporary news from Slovenia, and frequently included political news. In the April/May 1963 edition, for example, the front page was dominated by an article entitled "Tito on cultural integration;" and the front page of the issue for September 1963 contained a report on Khrushchev's visit to Yugoslavia. Third, the publication was now displaying signs of greater commercialism; advertising from sources beyond the Slovene community began to be manifest; and the overall visual format began to resemble that of the mass circulation daily newspapers.

By these actions Kapušin and Kodrič were aiming to make the publication independent of the *SKM*. Through large scale advertising they endeavored to raise funds from independent sources; their goal was to be able to freely determine the contents and format of the publication. This attempt to make it independent of club control can be demonstrated by a comparison of three issues of the publication, in the section where the publishers of *Slovenski Vestnik* are listed, as follows:

In the June 1964 issue: published by "the *Slovene Assoc. Melbourne*".

In the August 1965 issue: published by "J. Kapušin and the *Slov. Assoc. Melb.*"

In the September 1965 issue: published by "J. Kapušin and *Konzorcij.*"

This action angered the committee members of *SKM*, as they had not been informed of the editors' intentions. Consequently, in 1965 both Kapušin and Kodrič were forced to resign, and *Vestnik* reverted to being more of a club newsletter.

From January 1966 until December 1987 Marijan Peršič has been the editor of *Vestnik*. Initially, as a consequence of the club's strained financial resources, due to mortgage repayments for the *Dom*, the publication had to return to its original duplicated format. The former title was re-introduced, *Vestnik*, but now with a new sub-title: "Glasilo Slovenskega Društva Melbourne" Finally, there was now very little advertising, and the emphasis was on club news and traditional cultural enhancement.

In May 1969 *Vestnik* reverted back to its printed form. At this stage the *SKM* was in a better financial position, able to support its own publication, although severe restrictions were still evident: the overall type-size was reduced to fit the materials onto a reduced page-size, and the publication's length was reduced to an average of four pages.

By the 1970s there were certain changes taking place in the Slovene community. In particular, there was now more than one club in Melbourne for Slovenes. As a result, more external community news was reported in *Vestnik*.⁵ It was progressing toward becoming

a publication that catered for an entire ethnic group rather than for the members of just one specific club. This change eventually demanded an increase in staff.⁶

One of the major advances in the publication during the 1969-1974 period was the increasing use of photographs. Under the editorship of Kapušin and Kodrič, photographs were regularly printed, although they were few in number. It was not until 1969 that photographs of Slovene residents of Melbourne and Geelong, of their respective clubs, and of their cultural events were routinely published. The past was re-lived when the December 1974 *Vestnik* contained four pages of photographs illustrating the opening of the *Dom*.

In February 1972 there occurred a major cultural event among the Slovenes of Melbourne and Geelong, an event that was to have a strong impact on increasing Slovene ethnic consciousness in the two cities: the Slovene group "Ansambel Lojze Slak" came on a tour of Australia. The group represented a direct cultural link with the homeland. *Vestnik* played an important communicative role in the advertizing, and afterwards the reporting, of this significant event. It also helped bring together Slovenes from all the different clubs, and to heighten Slovene consciousness during a time when multiculturalism, as a government policy, had only recently been introduced by the Whitlam Government.

In 1972 the *SKM* sold its Princess Hill property and used the proceeds from the sale to purchase an entire hill in the outer north-eastern district of Eltham. Here the committee members began to embark on their most ambitious project to date, the building of a Slovene cultural and recreational center. This new club center took many years to build; even today additions are still being made. The construction was entirely by voluntary labor, thanks to the large number of skilled tradesmen among the club's members. *Vestnik* played a very prominent part in this venture. As a channel of information, it explained to its readers in great detail what the club was proposing to do on the newly acquired land. A sketch of the intended club house dominated page 1 of the November 1972 issue. *Vestnik* was also an effective instrument for gaining support for the construction of the building; as this was to be done voluntarily, it was imperative that the publication should attract as many volunteers as possible. Even the youth were encouraged:

"But, for this centre to become a reality and not just remain a dream, we the Slovene youth must be prepared to support the *SKM* to the fullest . . . The Association needs your help to convert this dream into a reality, and thereby share in its fruits."⁷

From January 1975 *Vestnik* changed to a larger format,⁸ and the length was extended to an average of six pages. More information could now be included on a variety of topics, although news and photographs of the *SKM* had priority. Interstate news was now making a more frequent appearance: the reason for this was indicated by the revised sub-heading, "'Messenger' / Glasilo Zveze Slovenskih Društev v Avstraliji".

News from Slovenia was absent from the pages of *Vestnik* from 1965 until the earthquake tragedy in North-Western Slovenia in 1976. In the May/June issue of that year two entire pages were devoted to reports of this event, and a plea was published for funds to aid the victims. Following this, there was virtually no overseas news until 1979; from this date it increased gradually, but never dominated the publication.

During 1975 an editorial committee was appointed, comprised of four prominent members of the general committee of the *SKM*. These members changed annually, with club elections. The committee was established following a court action in 1975, in which the editor and the author of a specific article were sued by a member of the Slovene community for misrepresentation. The editorial committee was considered a safeguard against the repetition of such an occurrence.

In June 1978 *Vestnik*'s sub-heading changed once again, this time to "Messenger / Glasilo Slovencev v Avstraliji." This was done to emphasize that it was no longer interested only in events in the clubs, but also in those involving Slovenes on a national level. By October 1980, the letterhead was re-designed—the first such change since 1969. The new design, which incorporated a graphic representation of the famous Slovene landmark, Bled, was aimed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the publication.

During recent years there has appeared an increasing amount of articles in English, as a counterbalance to those in Slovene. The aim hereby was to adequately cater to second-generation Slovenes, many of whom are not literate in the language of their parents. This action, although not entirely a new one for *Vestnik*, was a conscious attempt to maintain the readership, and hence the involvement, of Australian-born Slovenes. It was a means by which the first-generation Slovenes believed that their national culture and traditions could be retained and passed on to posterity. Its success rate needs investigation.

Vestnik's readership has expanded substantially since its inception. When it began in 1955, 70 copies were produced; in 1987, the circulation was approximately 600. Subscriptions were not restricted to Slovene residents in Australia, but also extended to Yugoslavia, the U.S.A., Canada, the United Kingdom, and Argentina.

Vestnik was begun because the *SKM* needed a medium through which regular contact could be made with its newly-settled and geographically isolated members. With the arrival of ever-increasing numbers of Slovene immigrants, this small publication expanded, over a very short period, to become the major voice, informer and comforter of the people it represented. *Vestnik* had in addition inadvertently developed into a valuable source for the history of post-war Slovene settlement in Victoria, of the Slovenes' problems, experiences, creative energies, and interests.

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NOTES

1. The name of this club was later changed to "Slovenian Association Melbourne."
2. *Vestnik* did eventually expand to other Australian states; during its early years it focused on Victorian Slovenes only.
3. The use of the word *časopis* must be considered informal with reference to a club information sheet.
4. The pages measured 20 x 25.5 cm.
5. That was, beyond the boundaries of the *SKM*.
6. It should be noted that all the work done for *Vestnik* was on a voluntary basis.
7. S. Penca, *Vestnik*, November 1972, pp. 5-6.
8. The page-size increased to 27.5 x 38 cm.

POVZETEK

RAZVOJ SLOVENSKEGA ČASOPISA V AVSTRALIJI: KRATKA ZGODOVINA VESTNIKA, 1955-1987

Zgodovina naselitve slovenske skupnosti v Melbourneju (New South Wales) priča, da je velika večina njenih emigrantov prišla po drugi svetovni vojni. Od vsega početka je med njimi prevladoval močan občutek odtujenosti, ki je v letu 1954 priklical v življenje "Slovenski Klub Melbourne", ki mu je že naslednjega leta sledila prva številka Vestnika. Članek pripoveduje, do neke mere nadrobno, o razvoju te kulturne iniciative in o rasti naklade tega lista.