

THE MYTH OF AMERICA IN SLOVENE LITERATURE UP TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Although myth in its traditional meaning relates to a God, a hero, or even an "ordinary" mortal, America acquired the quality of a myth in the collective consciousness of the Slovene people soon after the first emigrants had set out for that mysterious, unknown land. To most Slovenes of the late 19th century, America was the enigma of enigmas—distant, unknown, exotic, and challenging. In the absence of scientific proofs, in the absence of *knowing* about America, myth became the spontaneous "defense" of an average Slovene against that unintelligible world. The people's imagination conjured up a working hypothesis of what America ought to be like. The myth of America therefore sought to explain the distant world and make its phenomena intelligible. This mythical product of imagination took root easily owing to the massive waves of emigration that shook Slovenia at the turn of the century. It received nourishment through letters written by the first emigrants as well as through oral reports of those who returned either for a brief visit or permanently.

The mythological figures have been traditionally both good and evil, both creative and destructive.¹ As if by inertia, the "good" myth of America sooner or later had to achieve its antithesis. The latter, however, did not spring up from the wells of human fantasy but rather from cruel American reality which slowly but surely made its way to Slovene countries. America as a myth therefore made its appearance as a living organism, an almost human creature who was either kindhearted, open handed and well meaning, giving away its treasures with both hands, or a greedy Moloch who would suck a man dry and destroy him.

During the final decade of the 19th and the first two decades of the 20th century, thousands of Slovenes were forced to sail across the ocean in order to survive, for bread was scant at home. Their massive departure was undoubtedly a tragedy for the Slovene nation as a whole for it left behind a torso; those who remained, or, rather, those who could afford to remain at home, may have felt guilty for the exodus.² It may well be that their feelings of guilt and helplessness stimulated the growth of the "negative" myth of America, the antimyth.

It is not quite clear when the myth of America first began to take shape although we may judge by the earliest reactions in literature that this must have taken place already before 1830. In 1836 Janez Cigler published the first Slovene novel *Sreča v nesreči* which, among other incredible incidents, takes one of the protagonists to America where he is sold (a white man!) as a slave. Cigler obviously knew very little about America, especially about

1 See Alenka Goljevšček's *Med bogovi in demoni*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1988.

2 See Marjan Rožanc's *Iz krvi in mesa*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1981.

its institution of slavery. Having idealized and sentimentalized the slave-master relationship, he turned what should originally be an antimyth of America into a positive myth.

In Slovene oral tradition the myth of America as a Promised Land spread rapidly. Especially country people living in conditions of extreme poverty were highly susceptible to fantastic stories. One person's decision to try his/her luck overseas often precipitated an avalanche, leaving half of the village deserted, the houses and land sold. No wonder Jakob Alešovec thought it was high time that the people were warned. In 1883 he published his story *Ne v Ameriko!* and subtitled it "a story to instruct the Slovenes." His aim was to preach a moral sermon strongly advising people to stay at home. The protagonist's words, "Do not come here to seek the Heaven!"³ are clearly expressive of Alešovec's purpose. To make his lesson complete, all his "American" adventurers must end tragically.

Five years later Fran Erjavec published a story titled *Zamorjeni cvet* in which he presented America as an idyllic, vast land, very picturesque but strange. It is an escape land, a place to go if one cannot pacify one's soul at home. Despite its being shown in extremely romantic colors (Erjavec did not bother about immigrant labor and the usual hardships), it remains an open question whether one can find real happiness there. "If you want fortune, real fortune, if you want to be the most fortunate among the fortunate—stay in your homeland, stay in your father's house/.../ You can go around the world but you won't find that fortune anywhere under the bright sun."⁴ Erjavec's half-hearted acceptance of the myth of America, romantic as it may be, allows its contradiction as well. Because of a shift of emphasis within the subject, America is seen as cool and strange. Better leave it alone if you want to be happy. The magnolia blossom which dies in the early frost becomes the emblem of displacement and misfortune. A displaced (misplaced) person is like a displaced (misplaced) flower. It cannot flourish in foreign soil.

After Erjavec other Slovene authors incorporated different versions of the American myth in their stories, novels, and even dramas, and they often did their best to turn it upside down. Here it must be mentioned that the myth of America is practically never central in the literary texts discussed in this paper—with the sole exception of some of Ivan Cankar's stories.

While Janez Mencinger in his story *Abadon* (1892) still conceived of America as the land of unlimited hope and promise—unlike Europe, where the future threatened to be completely spiritually and emotionally empty as well as dehumanized, Ivan Tavčar, who in the eleven issues of the 1894 *Ljubljanski zvon* published a series of stories titled *V Zali*, saw America with the eyes of a realist. His Jernač in *Jernačeva zgodba* escapes to America in order to avoid imprisonment—the retribution for his participation in a village brawl—as well as to earn some money. He earns a lot of it, judged by the simple village standards, yet he knows that the price was high, too

3 Jakob Alešovec, *Ne v Ameriko*, Ljubljana, 1883, 72.

4 Fran Erjavec, *Zamorjeni cvet*, Ljubljana: Matica slovenska, 1883, 19.

high perhaps, and that he could thank his robust nature and good luck that he survived. *Zgodba šepastega Tinčeta* reveals both the brilliance and squalor of America. "It is said that it is so easy to earn money in America,"⁵ says the narrator Tinče but he knows that it is equally easy to lose it. The two protagonists who return as beggars to die in the native village put the glamorous myth of America to a serious test. *Žalostnega Mihe zgodba* confirms the success formula but raises the question of the relative importance of money for human happiness.

Tavčar handled the myth of America again in his story *Cvetje v jeseni*.⁶ Regardless of their motives for emigration (debts, a woman), the farmer Mlačan, and Danijel, the farm-hand, firmly believe that they will stay in America only a short while and then return home with enough dollars to fill a wicker-basket. They take a chance but Danijel ends up among the losers and returns a beggar. When asked about America, he yells, "What? /.../ That's no life, that's the Devil!"⁷ What happened to Mlačan remains a mystery.

Fran Saleški Finžgar was too deeply rooted in his native soil and too convinced a realist to spread among his readers the "fairy tales" about America. Hard, realistic, unsentimental is his description of America in his tale *Dekla Ančka*, published in 1913. True, in America one can find work easily and earn well, but the work is hard and dangerous. Only the strongest and luckiest may survive and save up enough to return home as rich "Amerikanci". Too many end up sadly, never to see their homeland and their beloved again.

Ever since the turn of the century hosts of Slovene writers generated, and Slovene readers responded to, texts which included either the myth of America or its antimyth—seen either as an identity, a paradigm, or an unpredictable mystery. The crying widow in Oton Župančič's poem *Duma* (1908)⁸ is both an identity and a paradigm.

One of the most brilliantly talented Slovene authors, Ivan Cankar, described in the language that has its typically own idiom and flavor, people violently afflicted by mischance. Yet Cankar is no realistic author and the myth of America in his works is no "traditional" myth but rather a transformation, a metaphor or even a symbol.

In 1904 he published his story *Križ na gori*, spurred by the success of Slovene impressionist painters in Vienna, after a cold, unfriendly refusal at home. Cankar placed side by side two opposing concepts rather than realities: homeland vs. "abroad". From the vantage point of an artist, the latter comes to represent a mythological America—open, welcoming, breezy as contrasted with the narrow, hateful, stuffy Slovene province. But eventually the protagonist Mate, having been exposed to pressures of anguish and despair, achieves that supreme state of self-awareness: the myth

5 Ivan Tavčar, *V Zali*, Zbrana dela, Ljubljana: Državna založba, 1953, 331.

6 Ivan Tavčar, "Cvetje v jeseni," *Ljubljanski zvon*, 1917.

7 The quotation is taken from the 1950 edition, 90.

8 Oton Župančič, *Samogovori*, Ljubljana, 1908. See the translation by Henry R. Cooper, Jr., in *Slovene Studies* 8/2 (1986) 87-94.

of America, yes, but only when propped up with proud, unyielding Slovene hood. Only then *can* America become a savior.

A year later, in 1905, Cankar wrote another story titled *Potepuh Marko in kralj Matjaž*. For the protagonist Marko who has regrettably lost his father's farm by drink, America stands as a symbol of the Promised Land. The ancient kingdom of King Matjaž has, in the course of centuries, been adopted as a myth and transformed into consolation and hope. America has equally turned into a myth that nourishes, consoles, and spurs hope. Although Marko antagonizes the hard times, he has to give up eventually. King Matjaž and his soldiers are dead and so are the dreams of the revival of his kingdom, a model of justice for everyone. The other Promised Land, America, does exist after all. It exists deep inside each person waiting to be discovered. Marko discovers it in love.

A similar idea is expressed in Cankar's *Zgodba o dveh mladih ljudeh*, published in 1911. A young man and a girl, both children of poor, numerous families, seek fortune "in the world". He goes to America, firmly believing in its myth of wealth and equality, she goes to town. Neither he nor she finds the promised land and they return home to nourish the only real wealth they have—their love.

In *Kurent* (1909), Cankar's symbolic story about the nature and destiny of Slovene people, America again surfaces as an idea, as a hope of a better future, as a country that is perhaps "more blessed" than the native land. America is seen as an escape from certain death, both physical and spiritual.

Once again the same idea is to be found in Cankar's unfinished play *Nioba*,⁹ expressed by Tone, "Only overseas does a man realize that he has two hands and a head..."¹⁰

Ivan Cankar had many followers and imitators; one of them was Vilko Mazi. In 1914 he published his short story *Amerikanec* in which he fully adopted Cankar's idea of the sterility of life at home, of the need to go abroad and widen the horizons. Mazi's protagonist, who has made a fortune in America is returning home—we see him on the train—much against his will, to take over his father's estate.¹¹

Zofka Kveder's naturalistic drama *Amerikanci*, published in 1908, brings face to face the myth of America and the voice of reason, or, America demythologized. The former, however, is stronger. People are taking mortgages on their homes, they are spending their money on drink—believing that in America they will easily earn enough to repay their debts and become rich in no time.

Sixteen years later, in 1924, Ivo Šorli published his novel *Golobovi*, a love story involving a man, his wife and his brother—the wife's girlhood lover. After her marriage she realizes that she should never have married the man she did not love. The husband, seeing that his wife doesn't love him, leaves for America. He does make a living there, is even better off than the

9 Published posthumously in 1924 in *Dom in svet*.

10 Ivan Cankar, *Nioba*, Zbrana dela, VIII, Ljubljana: Državna založba.

11 Vilko Mazi, "Amerikanec", *Ljubljanski zvon*, 1914.

majority of Slovene immigrants, yet he makes no secret of it that America is far from being what people believe it to be.

In remote, backward parts of Slovenia the romantic dream of America as the land next only to Paradise persisted. In 1933 Miško Kranjec published a story titled *Kati Kustecova*, a realistic-naturalistic narrative about poverty, love and hatred. The protagonist Kati eventually leaves her home, her child and her itinerant husband, and goes to France never to return. Before her departure though, she seriously considers going to America for she has heard "about people who have left for America, earned well, and have been sending heaps of money home."¹² She, too, could return rich and they would live happily ever after.

One of the protagonists of Ivan Tanc's story *Ženin iz Amerike*, published in 1938, the girl Tilka, frequently embarrasses her friend Nande for she has so many questions about America, and Nande, despite his high school education is unable to answer them. The fact is that Slovenia at that time was predominantly Europe-oriented. Even intellectuals knew little about America let alone simple people. This, of course, provided nourishing ground for all kinds of myths. After World War I the horizons gradually widened, and some "Amerikanci" returned to their homeland as well. Little remained for the myth of America to thrive on. No wonder then that the myth of America slowly but surely gave way to its opposite. In Tanc's story the myth of America is still so much alive among the simple people that they no longer distinguish between fiction and reality. When Tone mails a Christmas parcel for his girlfriend Tilka containing a silk scarf and a cheap ring, the villagers start making up stories; they imagine having seen a cart full of presents on its way to Tilka's, they speak about her incredible riches, they "know" for sure that she is getting ready to buy a farm. "Hasn't he mailed you thousands?"¹³ a non-believing villager asks her. For Tilka and her mother, however, the dream is over when they first see a Slovene-American paper Tone has mailed for them.

While the myth of America was slowly dying away and the antimyth was taking its place, an attempt was made to balance the two opposites. Tone Seliškar's juvenile story *Rudi*, published in 1929, set itself the task of "correcting" the myth of America. The result was a thesis-story.

"America is namely a very special country. A man is judged only by his work. Work, work, and again work. Everybody is a worker there. Nobody is ashamed of it and many a professor, engineer, teacher, has already worked in a factory, mine, on railroads, in a harbor, in a printer's shop, in forests."¹⁴ Seliškar's story is too didactic and contains too many coincidences to be believable yet his idea is basically correct: America is cruel, cold, and unscrupulous but it nevertheless offers opportunities for those who are willing to take the risk. Maybe they will succeed.

12 Miško Kranjec, *Sreča na vasi*, Ljubljana: Hram, 1933, 105.

13 Anton Tanc, *Ženin iz Amerike*, Ljubljana: Cankarjeva družba, 1938, 43.

14 Tone Seliškar, *Rudi*, Ljubljana: Merkur, 1938, 50.

The myth of America in its traditional sense was an anonymous, nonliterary formulation of what people believed to be the whole truth; later on, however, it turned into a literary device used in order to express something deeply felt by the artist, something that the readers would be able to respond to. No doubt, Cankar used the potential of myth, the myth of America in particular, to the fullest.

With scientific progress, with the development of communications, the myth and antimyth of America began losing their efficacy. As America became more easily accessible and could be exposed to critical inspection, they gradually melted with the objective reality. The myth of America spent itself although it did not die. It joined the body of Slovene mythology, it settled in the repository of national memory—in short, it became a tale and part of Slovene folklore as well as literature.

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POVZETEK

MIT AMERIKE V SLOVENSKEI KNJIŽEVNOSTI DO II. SVETOVNE VOJNE

Amerika kot mit se pojavlja v slovenski ljudski zavesti vse od časov prvega množičnega izseljevanja v to deželo v drugi polovici 19. stoletja. V svojem neznanju si je ljudska domišljija slikala Ameriko kot obljubljeni deželo, kjer se cedita med in mleko, kjer človek obogati čez noč. Šele ko je Amerika začela prodirati v zavest ljudi tudi kot realnost - z vračanjem prvih razočarancev, in ko so si redki izobraženci nabrali nekaj znanja o tej deželi, se je pojavil "antimit" - podoba Amerike kot krvoločne, brezobzirne pošasti, kjer priseljenec mora propasti, tako gmotno kot moralno. Ti dve tendenci se lepo odražata v slovenski književnosti, saj je vrsta znanih in manj znanih avtorjev posegla po njiju, začevši z Janezom Ciglerjem in Jakobom Alešovcem. Mit oziroma "antimit" o Ameriki se v slovenski književnosti odraža na dva načina - večinoma kot stranski motiv v tematsko sicer povsem drugačnem literarnem delu, nekajkrat pa kot osrednja tematika, kot npr. v drami Zofke Kvedrove Amerikanci. Na povsem svojski način pa je motiv Amerike oziroma izseljenstva uporabil Ivan Cankar, saj je v obeh videl edini up umetnikovega preživetja oziroma njegovega nadaljnega razvoja, ki doma zaradi "zatohlosti" ni bil mogoč. Da sta bila mit Amerike in njegovo nasprotje v času pred drugo svetovno vojno zelo razširjena, priča vrsta ustvarjalcev slovenske književnosti, ki so ga vključili v svoja dela: Fran Erjavec, Ivan Tavčar, Fran Saleški Finžgar, Ivan Cankar, Vilko Mazi, Zofka Kveder, Ivo Šorli, Ivan Tanc (Čulkovski).