

THE MYTH OF AMERICA AND THE SOCIETY OF ST. RAPHAEL

Andrej Vovko

The title of my paper is in two parts, the first being the Myth of America and the second, the Society of Saint Raphael. I can deal with each of them only briefly.

Regarding the Myth of America in the Slovene tradition, we can generally speaking define two of its extremities, both expressed in Biblical terms: America presented as The Promised Land on the one hand and Sodom and Gomorrah on the other. The presentation of the Promised Land, which is to some extent alive in Slovenia even nowadays, depicts America as a variation of wonderland, or as a popular vision of the land of unlimited possibilities, where dollars lie on the streets and all you need do is pick them up. The presentation of Sodom and Gomorrah describes America as a nest of every sin and vice, where you can easily lose your fortune and/or your life. Between these quite picturesque extremities there was, of course, all the whole spectrum of images of America, from favorable to unfriendly ones. All these images, extreme and others, no doubt developed on the basis of thousands and thousands of real experiences of Slovene immigrants in America, conveyed by letters or oral communications to their relatives in the "Old Country" (as immigrants called their original homeland).

Before we can put the viewpoints of the Society of St. Raphael for the protection of Slovene emigrants regarding the myth of America in the above described framework of opinions, let me describe one of the earliest of the eager adherents of "America as the Promised Land." Before the mass exodus to America from Slovene lands one of the few non-missionary Slovene immigrants was Matija Premuta, from Bela krajina, the southern part of Carniola or present day Slovenia on the Croatian border. After hawking about Europe, he came to America in 1839, bought land in Saint Louis and opened a store and an inn. He wrote to his parents, and described America very enthusiastically: "There are many people who leave Carniola and go on business to the foreign lands. We can find them in abundance in Austria, Germany and Hungary. Why does nobody come to America, to the promised land to rich India? Everybody here, no matter whether rich or poor, can have two, three, even four sorts of meat three times a day, and we have no other bread than wheat-bread." Premuta's letter was published in 1845 in the famous Slovene newspaper *Kmečke in rokodelske novice*, edited by Dr. Janez Bleiweis, known also as "the Father of Slovene Nation." Probably Bleiweis himself accompanied this minuscule panegyric on America with the sober commentary: "We hear sad things from many thousands of people, who emigrated to America and found hunger and misery instead of wealth. There are few who are so lucky as our Premuda." Bleiweis was obviously the representative of those who strongly warned against emigrating to America, and urged Slovenes to stay at home. That

was precisely the advice which he gave his readers the following year: "Stay at home and work diligently! Gone are the times when there were fried chickens [the symbol of the food that only the rich could afford in Bleiweises days] flying into your mouths in America."¹

Let me now proceed to the second topic mentioned above. The Society of St. Raphael for the protection of Slovene emigrants was just one of such organisations which developed in the second half of 19th century within the Catholic Church in Italy, Germany and in 1890 in Austro-Hungary. Within the Austrian Society of St. Raphael, named after the traditional patron of travellers, the Archangel Raphael, who—as you may remember—accompanied young Tobias in the Old Testament, there was a Slovene branch organisation founded in Ljubljana in 1907, which according to some sources was gaining a sort of independence in 1908. It ceased to function after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A truly independent Slovene Society of St. Raphael was established in Ljubljana in 1927, and it existed until after World War II, when all Catholic organisations in Slovenia were banned, following the Communist takeover. Concerning the activity of the Society of St. Raphael before World War I, let me remind you that there was also a society with the same name established in 1908 in New York, which we must not confuse with the one in Ljubljana. The Society of St. Raphael in New York was an association of Slovene immigrants from this part of USA, with a Catholic leaning.²

The "modus operandi" for both Slovene Societies before and after World War I was very much alike: the protection of Slovene emigrants traveling abroad by providing them with basic information, with badges of recognition and identity cards, advising them to contact the agents of the Society especially in the emigrant and immigrant ports, taking care of immigrants' material as well as spiritual needs, advising them on the best ways of travel, helping them to establish themselves in the host countries, to find jobs and lodgings, warning them about dangers, again material and spiritual, providing them with Slovene priests and teachers. The main emphasis of the Slovene and other Societies of St. Raphael was not promoting emigration; on the contrary, they campaigned very loudly and persistently against it and advised it only as a "last ditch solution." So the Society assisted and advised only those who had firmly made up their minds to try to find a better life abroad. Among the characteristic activities of the Slovene Society of St. Raphael were endeavours to re-establish lost ties between emigrants and their relatives, advising in matters connected with testamentary questions, influencing public opinion and state authorities in the "Old Country" to give more attention to the emigrants' questions and problems, promoting these questions with newspapers, Calendars and other publications, and starting preparations for the establishment of Slovene

1 Vladimir Valencic, "Izseljevanje Slovencev v tujino do druge svetovne vojne," *Dve domovine. Razprave o izseljenstvu / Two Homelands. Migration Studies*. 1. Institut za slovensko izseljenstvo ZRC SAZU, 1990, 40.

2 Bogdan Kolar, "Družba sv. Rafaela do ustanovitve ljubljanske podružnice," *Dve domovini / Two Homelands* 1, 107-119; Marjan Drnovšek, *Pot slovenskih izseljencev na tuje. Od Ljubljane do Ellis Islanda-Otoka solza 1880-1924*. Ljubljana: Mladika, 1991, 88-92; Bogdan Kolar, "Družba sv. Rafaela v New Yorku," *Mohorjev kjoledar za leto 1988*, Celje 1987, 103-104.

emigrants' archives, a museum, and a scientific center for the study of their history, none of which, regrettably, led to a successful conclusion.³

After this deliberately condensed and incomplete presentation of the Society of St. Raphael, let us illustrate with a few examples its views of the Myth of America. At the founding assembly of the Slovene branch association of the Society of St. Raphael "for the protection of Catholic emigrants from Carniola, Carinthia and the Littoral" (that was its official name) on the 11th November 1907, there was a warning against "fraudulent agents," who lay in wait for the new immigrants in the American harbours like the beasts for their prey. The need for prompt information about conditions in America, which were needed to advise would-be immigrants to this country, was also emphasized. "There is news of the heavenly happiness in America, circulating in various newspapers, books and booklets, but we must be cautious. The capitalists, the American businessmen, shipping companies and the American government work for themselves and publish these advertisements."⁴

A typical attitude towards emigration to America was expressed in an article published in 1909 urging emigrants not to go there, and inviting them to join the Society of St. Raphael. The main reason given to prove that America long ago ceased to be the Promised land (exactly this expression is used), were the frequent and massive refusals of the American authorities at the port of New York to allow immigration to those who had neither the prescribed amount of money, or relatives and acquaintances in the States from whom they could borrow it.⁵

Let us conclude this quick review with a slightly larger presentation of a mild version of the Sodom and Gomorrah image. One of most famous Slovene immigrant priests, Father Kazimir Zakrajšek, who was president of the re-established Society of St. Raphael from 1928 till its demise in 1945, wrote in 1929 a booklet entitled *Izseljencem na pot* with the subtitle *Nekaj poučnih besed našim izseljencem pri odhodu iz domovine*. The booklet was published by the Society of St. Raphael. Father Zakrajšek used widely his experiences, accumulated during the long years of his activity among Slovene immigrants in the U.S.A.. He warned his Slovene countrymen against unnecessary emigration and stressed that during his stay in America he had heard again and again Slovene immigrants cursing the moment when they set foot on American soil for the first time, and even Cristopor Columbus for discovering this unhappy land. Unlike some other advisers, Zakrajšek added to this "black" vision his personal experience of other immigrants, whom he met and who worked dilligently, saving money and living as good Christians even in foreign lands.

To help new immigrants find prosperity and happiness, Father Zakrajšek warned them against five major sins, which he named "plagues", all illustrated from his American experiences and fitting very well into the

3 Josip Premrov, ed., *Izseljenski koledar za leto 1937*, Ljubljana: Družba sv. Rafaela, 1936, 96.

4 "Rafaelova družba," *Slovenec* (Ljubljana) 1907, 265, (16.11.), 1 - 2.

5 "Ne v Ameriko," *Občinska uprava*, (Ljubljana) IV/1909, 16 (25.8.).

Sodom and Gomorrah image. According to Father Zakrajšek the first "plague" was "the cursed liquor", responsible for 75% of Slovene immigrants not being first class Nabobs. He also mentioned the fail-safe system for detecting Slovene immigrants in unfamiliar settlements: the greatest quantities of empty bottles and barrels in front of the houses. The second of Zakrajšek's "plague" was fornication. As the best defence against it he recommended that emigrants take their wives with them, or marry honest girls from the old country as soon as possible. He also warned against the widespread system of "boarding:" taking unmarried men into the family houses as lodgers. He branded it as unworthy slavery for the wives and an opportunity for an immoral life. The remaining three "plagues" as presented by Father Zakrajšek bore many similarities: ungodliness, the ungodly organisations of immigrants and the ungodly newspapers, all again illustrated with experiences from the United States. He recommended that emigrants contact Slovene parishes, Slovene catholic schools, and ask local priest for advice on which organisations to join and which newspapers to read.⁶

Bearing in mind the very limited number of facts here presented in this very fragmentary review, let me summarize the contribution of the Society of St. Raphael to the Myth of America in Slovenia. I can observe that the views expressed lie somewhere between the Promised Land and Sodom and Gomorrah, although touching in some ways one or the other extremity. And the distribution of the majority of views between the two extremities is, thank God, one of the pleasant and encouraging sides of our life.

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POVZETEK

MITA O AMERIKI IN DRUŽBA SV. RAFAELA

O Ameriki je domišljija slovenskih ljudi spletla mitološko predstavo, katere skrajne meje predstavljata svetopisemski prispodobi: Amerika - "Obljubljena dežela", in Amerika - "Sodom in Gomora", "гнездо in leglo vsake predstavljive in nepredstavljive pregrehe in razvade". Ti skrajni prispodobi in vse druge predstave Amerike med obema skrajnostima, so se nedvomno razvile na podlagi tisočev resničnih izkušenj slovenskih izseljencev v Ameriki, ki so jih v pismih ali drugače sporočali svojim sorodnikom v "starem kraju". Članek se najprej ustavlja ob pogledih na Ameriko enega prvih laičkih slovenskih izseljencev v ta del sveta, Belokranjca Matije Premute, ki je slavil Ameriko kot "Obljubljeno deželo" in "bogato Indijo". V nadaljevanju pa se avtor podrobno ukvarja s publikacijami Družbe sv. Rafaela z začetka našega stoletja, ki so svarili Slovence doma kot slovenske izseljence v Ameriki pred sleparskimi agenti in njihovo propagando o rajski sreči v Ameriki (1902), zlasti pa še ob publikacijah predsednika Družbe sv. Rafaela (1928-1945), p. Kazimir Zakrajšek, o izseljevanju v Ameriko, predvsem ob njegovi znani brošuri Izseljencem na pot: Nekaj poučnih besedi našim izseljencem pri odhodu iz domovine.

⁶ P. Kazimir Zakrajšek, *Izseljencem na pot. Nekaj poučnih besed našim izseljencem pri odhodu iz domovine*. Ljubljana: Družba sv. Rafaela v Ljubljani, 1929, 4-20.