

LOUIS ADAMIC'S IMAGE OF AMERICA AS IT HAS BEEN PRESENTED TO THE SLOVENE READING PUBLIC

Janja Žitnik

Any American reader who has read Louis Adamic's books and most of his several hundred articles on various problems of American society, will be well acquainted with the author's complex, constantly developing image of his second homeland. Yet his picture of America presented to the Slovene reader was necessarily selective, narrower, less complex than the one known to the American reader, and there was less continuity in its inner development. Why was this so?

Of Adamic's works, the Slovene reader became acquainted with the following books:

1. *Kriza v Ameriki*, published in Ljubljana in 1932. The book consists of Anton Debeljak's translation of several of Adamic's articles, mostly on the desperate situation of American workers at the time of the Depression, articles that were originally published in *Harper's Magazine* in New York. Later they were included in Adamic's books *Dynamite* and *Laughing in the Jungle*;

2. *Dinamit (Dynamite)*, the Croatian translation by Branko Kojić, published in Zagreb in 1933;

3. *Smeh v džungli (Laughing in the Jungle)*, translated into Slovene by Stanko Leben and published in Ljubljana in 1933.¹

And that is all until seventeen years later—six years after World War Two—when *Vnuki*, Mira Mihelič's translation of Adamic's *Grandsons*, appeared in our bookstores.² Another book by Adamic came out in Maribor in 1951. Its title is *Iz dveh domovin (From Two Homelands)*; it contains selected chapters from Adamic's works *My America*, *From Many Lands*, *A Nation of Nations* and *Laughing in the Jungle* in a Slovene translation by Vito Krajger, Ivan Črnagoj, Branko Rudolf and Olga Škerlj-Grahor.

These two groups of Adamic's works, published in Slovene (or, in one case, in Croatian) translation in 1932-33 and in 1951, together with a few of Adamic's articles in Slovene papers and magazines create that part of the author's image of his adopted homeland that was accessible to the Slovene reader. Later, in the 1960s and 1980s, Slovene publishers brought out six further Slovene editions of Adamic's works. The first group of these relatively recent editions contains all Adamic's works on Yugoslavia: *The Native's Return*,³ *Struggle*,⁴ *My Native Land*⁵ and *The Eagle and the*

1 A year later a Croatian translation of this work came out in Zagreb, and 18 years later in Sarajevo.

2 *Vnuki, zgodba iz ameriških usod*, translated by Mira Mihelič, Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1951.

3 *Vrnitev v rodni kraj*, translated by Mira Mihelič, Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1962 (with the author's biography by Mira Mihelič).

4 *Boj*, translated by Jože Stabej, Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1969 (with an introduction by Ivan Bratko).

5 *Moja rojstna dežela*, translated by Branko Gradišnik, Ljubljana: Borec, 1983 (with introductions by Ivan Bratko and Joža Vilfan, and a biography and bibliography of Louis Adamic by Jerneja Petrič).

Roots.⁶ The remaining two books published in the 1980's (*Dinamit*⁷ and *Smeh v džungli*⁸) are new translations of Adamic's first prewar works on the problems of America which had already been published in Ljubljana or Zagreb before World War Two. The choice of these six titles is quite understandable, although it doubtlessly failed to fill the considerable gap in the selection of Adamic's works in Slovene.

Obviously, the Slovene editions of Adamic's works after 1951 did not tend to widen the Slovene reader's insight into the American public and private scene in the first half of this century as it is described in those of Adamic's works that, curiously enough, have not been translated into Slovene. The most important among these works are *My America*, *From Many Lands*, *Two-Way Passage*, *What's Your Name?* and *A Nation of Nations*. A Spanish translation of *From Many Lands*, for example, was published in Buenos Aires only two years after the original,⁹ and a Czech edition of *Dinner at the White House* only a year after the Harper's edition.¹⁰ I can find no logical reason that could explain the lack of readiness to introduce some of Adamic's widely recognized observations regarding American society to his own people.

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What has the Slovene reading public learned about the United States from Louis Adamic's books? Let me summarize some of the main features of this particular image, and illustrate them with the most characteristic quotations from Adamic's early works through which the Slovene reader met with the author's view of America.

When he was a boy at the age of eight or nine, Adamic was highly impressed by a few men from his village who came back from America. On the basis of what they said, the boy's notion of the United States was that it was "a grand, amazing, somewhat fantastic place—the Golden Country—a sort of Paradise—the Land of Promise in more ways than one—huge beyond conception, thousands of miles across the ocean, untellably exciting, explosive, quite incomparable to the tiny, quiet, lovely Carniola; a place full of movement and turmoil, wherein things that were unimaginable in Blato happened daily as a matter of course."¹¹

This notion that young Adamic probably shared with the majority of the country population in Carniola, is well described in the opening chapter of his autobiography *Laughing in the Jungle*. The following passages discuss certain parts of American reality from the young Louis' point of view. In his view, many things he heard about America are surprising, almost incredible:

6 *Orel in korenine*, translated by Mira Mihelič, Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1970 (with an introduction by Ivan Bratko); second edition: Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1981 (with a new introduction by Ivan Bratko).

7 *Dinamit*, translated by Bogdan Gradišnik, Ljubljana: Borec, 1983 (with introductions by Ivan Bratko and Janez Stanonik, and a biography and bibliography of Louis Adamic by Jerneja Petrič).

8 *Smeh v džungli*, translated by Rapa Šuklje, Ljubljana: Borec, 1983 (with introductions by Ivan Bratko and Mirko Jurak, and a biography and bibliography of Louis Adamic by Jerneja Petrič).

9 Henry A. Christian, *Louis Adamic: A Checklist*, The Kent State UPress, 1971, 72, unit 521a.

10 Christian, 75, unit 544a.

11 *Smeh v džungli*, 5-6; (*Laughing in the Jungle: The Autobiography of an Immigrant in America*, New York and London: Harper, 1932, 5).

"In America one could make pots of money in a short time, acquire immense holdings, wear a white collar, and have polish in one's boots like a *gospod*—one of the gentry—and eat white bread, soup, and meat on weekdays as well as on Sundays, even if one were but an ordinary workman to begin with. In Blato no one ate white bread or soup and meat, except on Sundays and holidays, and very few then.

"In America one did not have to remain an ordinary workman. There, it seemed, one man was as good as the next. There were dozens, perhaps scores, or even hundreds of immigrants in the United States, one-time peasants and workers from the Balkans [...] who, in two or three years, had earned and saved enough money working in Pennsylvania, Ohio, or Illinois coal-mines or steel-mills to go to regions called Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Nebraska, and there buy sections of land each of which was larger than the whole area owned by the peasants in Blato... Oh, America was immense—immense!

"I heard a returned *Amerikanec* tell of regions [...] where single farms [...] were larger than the entire province of Carniola! It took a man days to ride on horseback from one end of such a ranch to the other. [...]

"In America everything was possible. There even the common people were "citizens", not "subjects", as they were in Austria and in most European countries. A citizen, or even a non-citizen foreigner, could walk up to the President of the United States and pump his hand. Indeed, that seemed to be a custom in America. There was a man in Blato, a former steel-worker in Pittsburgh, who claimed that upon an occasion he had shaken hands and exchanged words with Theodore Roosevelt, to whom he familiarly referred as "Teddy"—which struck my mother as very funny."¹²

But this lovely, romantic notion of the country was suddenly confronted with a cruel, utterly dreadful image of America, spread by the Yugoslav movement:

"Down with Austria! Down with America! Austria drove the good Slovenian peasants to America, and America ruined them. (...) America broke and mangled the immigrants' bodies, defiled their souls, deprived them of their simple spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities, corrupted their charming native dialects and manners, and generally alienated them from the homeland."¹³

A part of this propaganda consisted of books and booklets full of warnings against any further emigration. One such book was a novel called *Obljubljena dežela* (The Land of Promise). It describes the unlucky voyage of a group of good and honest Slovene peasants to America. At the end of

¹² *Smeh v džungli*, 6-7; (*Laughing...*, 5-6).

¹³ *Smeh v džungli*, 31-32; (*Laughing...*, 26).

their short sojourn there, during which they wandered from one tragic experience to another, they all die of thirst and hunger.¹⁴

When Adamic emigrated to the United States and finally began to write books and short stories about his new homeland, his picture of America was not much different from the unhappy novel I have just mentioned. In his early sketches, including "A Bohunk Woman,"¹⁵ and in his first book *Dynamite*, he shows the darkest side of the country. As Adamic sees it, America endangers the lives of the entire working class, and causes irremediable damage to the spiritual health of almost everybody in the land. Life in America is ruinous not only to millions of immigrants, but also to old-stock Americans. Adamic illustrated this belief with numerous striking reports on working conditions and other social problems in his books *Kriza v Ameriki* and *Iz dveh domovin*, and with about a dozen anecdotes in *Laughing in the Jungle* and *Grandsons*.¹⁶ The subtitle of *Laughing in the Jungle* is *The Autobiography of an Immigrant in America*. In fact, the book is rather a belletristic version of *Dynamite*, a narrative impersonation of the ideas expressed in Adamic's first book. It is not surprising that practically all the important characters in *Laughing in the Jungle*, as well as in *Grandsons*, die at the end of the story, most of them relatively young (Steve Radin, Captain W. D. Blakelock, Captain Michael Koska, Jack Kipps, Mila Tanasich; Peter, Jack and Andy Gale, etc..)

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When Louis Adamic visited Yugoslavia in 1949, his picture of America was essentially changed. He did everything he could to persuade his old kinsmen that the United States was a great country in many respects, although it was as anti-Communist as any country could be (and that the economically exhausted Yugoslavia should turn to the American government for help and co-operation). He took this new "mission" so seriously that he almost denied his earlier statements and views, mostly those expressed in *Dynamite*, the book that he now regarded as his worst work. He utters this judgment in a letter to the Slovene author and translator Mira Mihelič, a letter in which he also says:

"America, as it is, deserves genuine love and respect; (...) Millionaires no longer build yachts worth a quarter of a million dollars, in Brooklyn no one starves, unsufficiently nourished children in Chicago are an exception, not a rule; workers who travel all over this huge country do not do it in order to find some work, but because they love strolling across the country's infinite spaces. *Dynamite* is no longer the weapon of the exploited or of the exploiters. (...) Now, the big fight in America is not for bread and milk but for better cars. Here (in Yugoslavia), everybody stares at the large Buick I

14 *Smeh v džungli*, 31-32; (*Laughing...*, 26).

15 "A Bohunk Woman", *American Mercury*, March 1930, 281-286.

16 The passages in *Vnuki* where the author presents this aspect of America most explicitly, are on pp. 131, 247, 319- 320.

drive; in America it happens that unemployed workers drive such cars."¹⁷

The writer was angry with Mira Mihelič because in one of her articles she presented Adamic's earlier, highly critical observations about American society and the American system, largely summarized from his first books. According to Adamic, the dark image of America expressed in her article was completely outdated when it was published in 1949.

Of course, much of this idealization is far from what the author really felt, especially a year later when he witnessed a rapid decline in the seemingly unshakeable American democracy. The unpublished chapter "Game of Chess in an Earthquake" (written in 1950-51), from his last book *The Eagle and the Roots*,¹⁸ is full of the author's bitter remarks about the decaying American society, the depraved "American spirit" that was once so glorious, and the regrettable change in human values in the country. It was the time when Senator Joseph McCarthy and the notorious Committee on Un-American Activities took the lead in the hysterical persecution of the American Left. Finally, Adamic himself became a victim of their persecution, and his last book could not be published in America until after his death.

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Although Louis Adamic is doubtlessly entitled to be regarded as the most important Slovene emigrant author, his contribution to the so called myth of America in Slovene tradition was not substantial. His books and articles on the United States had a strong effect on numerous Slovene intellectuals and politicians, and his clearly stated concepts about the future of his both homelands after the Yugoslav-Cominform split greatly influenced many Slovene and other members of the federal government when the need for various forms of co-operation between the two countries was in question, and when so many ideological obstacles had to be overcome. But when we speak of the general Slovene image of America, traditional or modern, it must be clear that it was not created by literary works, either by Louis Adamic or by the most important American authors that have been translated into Slovene. The myth was created by life itself, by the picturesque "Amerikanci" who returned from America better off than they were when they left, and by the tragically distressed widows of those who never came back. And no one, I believe, has been able to picture this myth so vividly as Louis Adamic. The passages in his books that describe the emigrants who returned from the Land of Promise, and the general excitement they cause in their villages—gaudy, boastful, generous men, always ready to tell wonderful stories about the fabulous land where they became rich, and never even mentioning the shady side and the dangerous

17 This passage is translated back into English from the Slovene translation of the letter, published in Mira Mihelič's autobiography *Ure mojih dni* (Murska Sobota: Pomurska založba, 1985, 195-196). The original letter has not been found.

18 The Library of the Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts, Manuscript Dept., Louis Adamic Collection, folder R 67/III-2.

traps of the country—those passages, in a way, made the heartiest part of the Slovene myth of America immortal.¹⁹

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POVZETEK

ADAMIČEVA SLIKA AMERIKE, KOT JE BILA PREDSTAVLJENA SLOVENSKIM BRALCEM

Prispevek obravnava razvoj Adamičeve predstave o Ameriki, kot se zrcali v slovenskih prevodih njegovih del: od prve idealizirane slike obljubjene dežele, ki jo je Louis še kot deček delil z večino slovenskega podeželskega prebivalstva, preko senčne strani Amerike, kakršno spoznavamo ob branju njegovih črtic in knjig iz tridesetih let, ter mnogo bolj optimističnega prikaza te dežele slovenskim rojakom leta 1949, pa do pisateljevega končnega razočaranja nad svojo drugo domovino v času makartizma, ko je pisal neobjavljeno poglavje o Ameriki z naslovom "Igra šaha med potresom" za knjigo Orel in korenine.

¹⁹ Louis Adamic, "Obljubljena dežela", in *Kriza v Ameriki*, Ljubljana: Tiskovna zadruga, 1932, 7-11; "Amerikanci na Kranjskem", in *Smeh v džungli*, Ljubljana: Tiskovna zadruga, 1933, 3-7.