

THE ART OF JANKO N. ROGELJ'S FICTION AND POETRY

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Kdo nam daje
misel lepo?
Kdo prižiga
luč v daljavi?
Kdo nam srca
bolna zdravi?¹

These nostalgic rhetorical lines, laden with homesickness, were written by the Slovene-American author and cultural worker Janko N. Rogelj. They symbolically explain the source of his passionate cultural and public activities as a Slovene immigrant in the United States in the first half of this century. The answer to the intimate immigrant yearning expressed in the quoted lines, one that "heals sick hearts," is his native land, Slovenia, "Naša mati / onstran morja!"² Rogelj was an important cultural worker in the Slovene diaspora in the U.S.A., and also wrote a number of short stories and poems whose literary and aesthetic merits are the object of this study. Therefore, Rogelj the literary author, and not Rogelj the important public figure, represents the subject of this case study.

He was one of the few Slovene immigrants of the first generation in the United States who served his compatriots with his pen: in his literary work he did two things; first, he tried to keep the memory of their native land alive in their minds and, second, he also described their new lives as immigrants, their hardships and joys, in a new, U.S. environment. In his numerous writings published in the U.S.A. and Slovenia, Rogelj had for many years been trying to offer spiritual consolation and to encourage Slovene immigrants in the United States, all along urging them not to forget their homeland and mother tongue, for "Slovenska beseda / ostala je z nami / in zvesta nas spremlja / v življenja jesen, / še vedno nas brani..."³ In an interview he clearly expressed his

¹ Janko N. Rogelj, "Domovina," *Skrivnostni klic* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1967) 11.

² "Our mother / Across the sea" [all translations into English by IM].

³ "The Slovene word / Has remained with us / And faithful it follows us / Into the autumn of life / It still defends us..." From. Rogelj's poem "Na večer življenja," quoted as the motto to the collection *Svoji k svojim* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1973).

longlife allegiances and his anti-melting-pot attitude: "Čeprav sem v tujini že skoraj pol stoletja, svoje domovine ne morem pozabiti, saj sem njen sin. Živim v zemlji, ki mi daje kruh, a s srcem sem v domovini in visim z vsako žlico na domači grudi."⁴

Rogelj (1895-1974) was born in Primskovo near Kranj, nowadays part of the town of Kranj in the Gorenjska region, and emigrated to the United States in 1913. He arrived there by ship from Trst/Trieste in 1913, just before the Great War, with the help of his uncle Boštjan Žvegelj, who had migrated to the States earlier.⁵ At first he tried his hand at various jobs, in factories and on the railroads, but already in 1916 he became a correspondent of *Glas svobode*, the Slovene American paper published in Pueblo, Colorado. In 1918 he published his first sketches in the magazine *Čas*. He then studied at Dubuque College in Iowa for two years and finally settled down as an insurance agent in Cleveland, Ohio. From his very arrival in the U.S.A. he had been very active in Slovene fraternal and cultural organizations. During 1918-1919 he was the first editor of *Enakopravnost* and for many years President of the Slovenian National Home and of the Slovenian National Library on St. Clair Avenue in Cleveland. He also was among the founders of the dramatic society "Ivan Cankar," established in Cleveland in 1919.

Rogelj wrote numerous historical, literary and educational articles, which were published in Slovene American press (*Glas svobode*, *Glas naroda*, *Prosveta*, *Enakopravnost*, *Napredek*, *Nova doba*, *Ameriški dru žinski koledar*, *Slovensko-amerikanski koledar*, *Čas*, *Slovenska družina*); he also wrote a comprehensive history of the Slovenian National Home on St. Clair Avenue.⁶ He also produced three collections of short stories, sketches and poems, written in Slovene and published by the publishing house Drž avna založba Slovenije in Ljubljana: *Kruh in srce* (1962), *Skrivnostni*

⁴ "Although I have spent almost half a century abroad, I cannot forget my native land, because I am its son. I live in a country which gives me bread, but my heart is in my native land, and I depend on it with every single fibre of mine." Jože Župančič, from an interview with Rogelj which took place in Litija, 1961, trans. by I. Maver. "Janko N. Rogelj," *Kruh in srce* (Ljubljana: Drž avna založba Slovenije, 1962), 100-101.

⁵ Župančič, "Janko N. Rogelj." Other references to Rogelj's literary work are: *Anthology of Slovenian American Literature*, ed. Edward Gobetz and Adele Donchenko (Willoughby Hills: Slovenian Research Center of America, Inc., 1977) 226; Jože Šmit, Introduction to *Skrivnostni klic*, pp. 5-7; and Mila Šenk, "Živim v zemlji, ki mi daje kruh, a s srcem sem v domovini....," *Slovenski izseljenski koledar* (Ljubljana: Slovenska izseljenska Matica) 223-224.

⁶ Janko N. Rogelj, *Pričetna zgodovina Slovenskega narodnega doma v Clevelandu v Ohio*. (Cleveland: Enakopravnost, 1954) 78 pp.

klic (1967), and *Svoji k svojim* (1973). In these collections can be found sketches and short stories which had previously been published in various newspapers and magazines over a longer period of time, while his second collection *Skrivnostni klic* also includes twenty-five of his poems. He wrote exclusively in the Slovene language, which is terse, laconic and never dated or grammatically incorrect. Rogelj was a longtime collaborator and close friend of Louis Adamič, who, for example, mentions him twice in his book *Two-way Passage* (pp. 188, 306). He spent the last years of his retirement in his native village of Primskovo and died there in 1974 while working on a bulky book of memoirs, which still awaits to be discussed and analyzed.⁷ It has not been published as yet, and is in manuscript form and full of autobiographical detail.⁸

Rogelj's short fiction (sketches, a few short stories and documentary accounts, which can trendily be labelled as 'creative non-fiction') is much more extensive and from the aesthetic point of view much more significant than his verse. If his poems largely express nostalgic memories of home and the feeling of homesickness, then most of his fiction can be described as pronouncedly autobiographical. He deals in it either with the memories of his youth and events from that period or develops emotionally strongly suggestive sketches modelled on Ivan Cankar's 'psychological' sketches. Immigrant issues and problems, however, become the subject of his fiction only in his later, more mature period of creativity. In his first two books, *Kruh in srce* and *Skrivnostni klic*, Rogelj presents 'memoiristic' sketches describing his youth in the 'old country', while his last book *Svoji k svojim* features fiction depicting and reflecting upon the lives of Slovene immigrants in the U.S.A.. It also includes his observations of the native Slovenia during his first return visit there just before the Second World War (e.g. "Kako je v Sloveniji," p. 92, written in 1938, and "V rojstni hiši," p. 96, written in 1939), expressing his ominous thoughts which announce the approaching maelstrom of war.

Rogelj's first book *Kruh in srce* includes some of his earliest, artistically and stylistically undoubtedly most successful sketches. The very first one (entitled "Amerikanec," p. 7), reveals his early, still somewhat stereotyped depiction of a crippled American, thus almost creating the 'literary' type of an unhappy and ruined

⁷ Jerneja Petrič, *Naši na tujih tleh* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1982,) 442.

⁸ Cf. Župančič, "Janko N. Rogelj," p. 120. The memoir manuscript is deposited in the archives of The Institute for Slovene Emigration Research of the Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts in Ljubljana.

Slovene emigrant who had returned from the U.S.A., which can be found in the Slovene fiction of the period:

“Amerikanec, Amerikanec, pokaži nam dolar!” smo kričali otroci, kadarkoli je prišel v našo vas. Naslonil je na ograjo in segel v žep raztrganega in umazanega telovnika. Med debelimi prsti smo videli razcefran in pomečkan ameriški dolar, ko je počasi izvlekel težko roko iz malega žepa.⁹

Full of human sympathy and genuine feeling for the beggar-American, this Rogelj's early sketch nevertheless exaggerates the usage of qualifying adjectives, which are amassed to the extent that they make the description overstressed and thus slightly pathetic (e.g. “*fat fingers*,” “*heavy hand*,” “*small pocket*”).

The sketch titled “Izgubljena stavka,” p. 31, is stylistically much more consistent and ranks among Rogelj's most accomplished works. He deals in it with the attempt of four village altar boys to obtain better ‘working conditions’ from the parish priest, that is to demand a raise in ‘salary’, which would be comparable with that of the neighboring parish. The sketch is full of subtle humor, sudden turning-points and unexpectedly ends with the defeat and punishment of the rebellious altar boys: they lose their ‘job’. The sketch “Nepozabni spomini,” p. 52, brings back Rogelj's fond memories of Kranj, Storžič and the river Kokra. These impressionistic fragments in a kaleidoscope of memoirs show the author's warm affection for his native region and masterfully describe the Slovene Arcadia in the Alpine Gorenjska region near Kranj. It is no exaggeration to say that Rogelj's reminiscences of home remain in all his literary work an incombustible mental and artistic ‘fuel’.

Rogelj's typically Cankarian sketch from his first collection of fiction is titled “Rdeče vrtnice,” p. 89. The author's deep regret and remorse reappears when he receives a Christmas present — a bunch of red roses. Namely, years ago, when still back in Slovenia, he had rejected red roses from the hands of a girl affected by consumption. The sketch is written in a terse, but deeply moving, subtle style, clearly reminiscent of Ivan Cankar's sketch “A Cup of Coffee,” which describes Cankar's remorse upon having rejected a cup of coffee offered to him by his mother. The narrator's rejection of the bunch of roses in Rogelj's sketch makes the heroine Jerica likewise walk away in great

⁹ “American, American, show us a dollar!” we children shouted, whenever he came into our village. He leaned against the fence and put his hand into the pocket of his torn and dirty waistcoat. Between his fat fingers we saw him hold a crumpled American dollar, when he slowly pulled his heavy hand out of the small pocket. (*Kruh in srce*, 7)

disappointment: "Stopicala je naporno in počasi, kakor da vleče težko breme. In kaj sem storil jaz? Odklonil sem vrtnice. Nisem vedel, da mi je z njimi ponudila ljubezen."¹⁰ Another parallel that can be drawn with Cankar is his cult of the mother and her all-embracing love, which is a characteristic trait also in Rogelj's sketches. In "Moj prijatelj," *Slovenski izseljenski koledar* 1973, he characteristically links his mother's love with immigrant issues, for it assumes the stature of patriotic love.

Rogelj's second book of fiction and poetry, *Skrivnostni klic*, describes the lives of the children of Slovene immigrants in the U.S.A. with great human sympathy and psychological insight and contrasts them with those living in Slovenia at that time (e.g. "Naš Matko," p. 43, and "Johnny," p. 47). His fiction about and for children is essentially autobiographical and thus based on the personal experiences of his own youth in Slovenia. The section of the book titled "V Ameriki - v Sloveniji" juxtaposes and contrasts the lives and destinies of Slovene Americans and Slovenes living "across the Big Pond" in Slovenia. It reveals Rogelj's 'creative' documentary style and deep sense of humor, often bordering on satire, another characteristic of Rogelj's fiction, which, however, comes fully to the fore only in his third collection of sketches and short stories titled *Svoji k svojim*. In this last book he is often bitter about the loss of Sloveneness and the 'melting' of Slovene immigrants with the new environment. To make this clear, he frequently contrasts or even mixes the two worlds, the United States and Slovenia. The sketch "Klepetulja," p. 17, for example, is just one case in point. It is an apparently humorous account, which, however, goes far beyond sheer humor. Deep down it expresses the universally tragic nature of all human hopes and expectations that can never be fully realized, either at home or abroad.

Rogelj's poems, collected only in the book *Skrivnostni klic*, are for the most part poems of homesickness and nostalgia, echoing the author's mental flash-backs to the 'old country' (e.g. "Domovina," p. 11, "Stari naseljenec misli," p. 27). Poems describing the typical life destiny of a Slovene immigrant in the U.S.A. and the mental and physical displacement and hard working conditions of immigrants, represent the second thematic body of Rogelj's lyrical verse ("Naša usoda," p. 20, "Sodobna Amerika," p. 28). His depiction of Slovene immigrants is occasionally also bright and optimistic, while his view of the contemporary U.S.A. remains essentially satirical. Rogelj's poems

¹⁰ "She trudged slowly, as if carrying a heavy burden. And what did I do? I refused the roses. I did not know that together with them she also offered me love." (*Kruh in srce*, 92)

are formally simple, partly written in rhymed stanzas and partly in free verse. They are almost without exception short and compact, even minimalist, their messages often only suggested and not overtly expressed in a straightforward manner. Like so many other immigrant poets, Rogelj also wrote a number of occasional pieces intended to commemorate various jubilees and anniversaries (e.g. "Ivan Zorman," *Svoji k svojim*, p. 33).

Rogelj's work was very popular and appreciated especially by the older generations of Slovene Americans. Today it can be said to be a literary reflection of the major events and cultural activities that took place in the Slovene diaspora in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Most of his collected works were published in various Slovene American papers and magazines prior to World War Two, but his three collections of fiction and poetry discussed here appeared only in the sixties and early seventies. They are a literary document of an era, of the creativity, the spiritual and physical struggle of the first generation of Slovene immigrants in the United States. The main merits of Rogelj's fiction and poetry are: a strong but artistically unobtrusively expressed social note, a fine sense of humor which borders on satire, a deep sympathy for the plight and suffering of children in the U.S.A. and Slovenia alike, an (existential) view of Man's destiny which is tragic and befalls everyone, and a terse straightforward linguistic expression. Quite a few of his sketches are classical examples of this (sub-)genre and can rightfully be compared with the best Slovene writing of this kind produced in Slovenia. Rogelj's literary work has so far not been given sufficient literary-critical attention and warrants further research. And, if we again wanted to answer Rogelj's questioning lines in the epigraph, the answer could only be one — his native land. Rogelj never lost or abandoned his own: he *was* his native land, Slovenia, in the New World, in the vigorous cultural activities and his own literary creativity.

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POVZETEK**UMETNOST PROZE IN POEZIJE JANKA N. ROGLJA**

Literarno delo izseljenca Janka N. Roglja je cenjeno med ameriškimi Slovenci, a mu doslej ni bilo posvečeno dovolj kritiške pozornosti, čeprav si jo spričo svoje umetniškosti in kulturne vrednosti nedvomno zasluži. Pričujoča študija obravnava Rogljevo kratko prozo in poezijo, ki je v treh zbirkah izšla po drugi svetovni vojni v Ljubljani in ki predstavlja literarni dokument nekega obdobja, t.j. literarno-kulturnega delovanja in življenja predvsem prve generacije slovenskih izseljencev v Ameriki. Glavne odlike Rogljevega pisanja, predvsem črtice, ki jo je razvil do cankarjanskih umetniških razsežnosti, so značilen smisel za humor, ki pogosto meji na satiro, jedrnat in neposreden jezikovni izraz ter jasna, toda subtilno umetniško izražena socialna nota.