

THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF SLOVENES IN AUSTRALIA

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1. General Overview

Up to the middle of the 18th century Australia was an unknown continent for Slovenes. It was first mentioned in the Slovene translation of *Antikrist*, a manuscript written by "bukovniki."¹ This part of the world, so distant for Slovenes, started to become more familiar only after compulsory eight-year schooling began in 1869. The completion of the so-called Southern Railway in 1857, which connected Ljubljana and Trst/Trieste and hastened the movement of people as well as goods in that direction, further strengthened the geographical knowledge of Slovenes.

This is also the period of the first available data on Slovene sailors working in the Austrian Merchant Navy who, while travelling around the world, anchored and set foot on Australian soil.² Their findings were written about in Slovene dailies, especially in *Novice*, the editor of which was Bleiweis, and in *Slovenski narod*. But by far the most detailed publication about life in Australia was the 1899 book by Josip Vrhovec, *Avstralija in nje otoki*.³ Since 1873 there has also been a special chapter on

¹ Zmago Šmitek, *Klic daljnih svetov* (Ljubljana: Borec, 1986) 317. (The bukovniki, persons with little education, copied manuscripts by hand for general use in their local communities.)

² Šmitek, 44–48. The author cites Matija Kliner, an attendant on the Austrian freighter *Novara* which was sailing around the world between 1857 and 1859, making a stop in Australia; and Rihard Pogačnik, a ship's officer from Trieste, who in 1860 sailed on the Austrian Lloyd steamship to the "southern land." He was followed by Anton Dolenc, a cadet from Lož, who in 1890 sailed aboard the corvette *Saida* on a voyage around the world, visiting the Australian seaports of Albany, Adelaide, Portland, Melbourne, Sydney and Hobart. He published his travel-records in *Slovenski narod* 274 (1899) 1 and 275 (1899) 1; mentioned also is Ivan Rupnik, a non-commissioned officer who was travelling aboard the corvette *Saida* in 1898/99).

³ Josip Vrhovec, *Avstralija in nje otoki* (Celovec/Klagenfurt: Mohorjeva družba, 1899).

Australia in geography textbooks used for the study of geography in high schools.⁴

All of the above-mentioned sources were instrumental in the formation of Slovene stereotypes about the Australian continent and its aboriginal inhabitants who, due to their outward appearance and even more their specific life-style, were pronounced "savages." Aside from other factors (such as the extremely long journey from European ports to the shores of Australia,⁵ the myth about America,⁶ warnings of the Church not to emigrate,⁷ and so on), it was this opinion that prevented the emigration of Slovenes to Australia on a larger scale. But it is nevertheless probable that the first Australian Slovenes were to be found among the 4,097 inhabitants of the Austro-Hungarian Empire who moved to Australia between 1876 and 1910.⁸ More reliable are data of this kind concerning the twenties and thirties of this century. According to it, a farmer and a prospector,⁹ a tavern-owner,¹⁰ a 15-year-old girl who fell victim to the slave trade,¹¹ and others, can be found among the emigrants to

⁴ For instance, Janez Jesenko, *Občni zemljepis* (Ljubljana, 1873); Fr. Orožen, *Zemljepis za meščanske šole* (Ljubljana, 1894); Jožef Kržišnik, *Zemljepis za srednje šole* (Ljubljana, 1924); J. Mešiček and Fr. Drnovšek, *Občni zemljepis za višjo narodno šolo* (Ljubljana, 1931).

⁵ As is mentioned by Vrhovec in *Avstralija in nje otoki* (212), it took a ship at least 36, more often even 46 days to cover the distance between London and Australia.

⁶ Between 1880 and at least 1910 masses of Slovenes emigrated to the U.S. (see Marjan Drnovšek, *Pot slovenskih izseljencev na tuje: Od Ljubljane do Ellis Islanda – Otoka solza v New Yorku 1880–1924* (Ljubljana: Mladika, 1991)).

⁷ The Church opposed the emigration of Slovenes, even though "Migration and emigration ... are huge apparitions of our time, worthy of our greatest attention, and are of utmost importance for the happiness and wellbeing of the individual ..., especially for the condition of Christian life and the Catholic Church." (Jan Kalan, "Sv. Rafael in izseljevanje na tuje," *Duhovni pastir* 26/10 (1909) 513.

⁸ Hans Chmelar, *Höhepunkte der österreichischen Auswanderung* (Vienna, 1974) 24.

⁹ This was D. F. Petek, whose letter "Edini Slovenec v Avstraliji" was published as by an unknown author in *Slovenski dom* 1/5 (1909) 4.

¹⁰ Franc Miklavčič mentions Kumar, a tavern-owner in Sydney, in his travel sketches "V Avstralijo," published in *Mohorjev koledar* 1913.

¹¹ At the beginning of the 20th century emigration was often equaled to the white slave traffic, i.e., to the abduction of young women for European brothels. This phenomenon was documented throughout the whole Slovene ethnic territory and is confirmed for Australia by the report that "a 15 year-old girl was abducted by 23 year-old Leopold Drame from Zibika and 29

Australia. Only after 1924, when the U.S. passed its well-known immigration laws,¹² did the number of Slovenes emigrating to Australia begin to increase. At first they came from the Primorsko region,¹³ and were later followed by people from Bela krajina, Notranjsko, Dolenjsko, and other regions. Approximately 700 Slovenes were reported to live in Australia before World War II.¹⁴

After 1945, when the Australian government started to apply its immigration policy, thus opening its door even more widely to peoples from Europe and the rest of the world, this swelling river of new workers in Australia started to receive trickles from Slovenia as well.

In that period the first Slovene emigrants were mostly political refugees who left their homeland when the one-party communist system came to power. In 1951, 3,000 of them already lived at the fifth continent.¹⁵ Emigrants from the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s shared a similar fate as their precursors: they crossed the Yugoslav border illegally and acquired the status of refugees in Italian and Austrian refugee camps. They came mainly from the border regions of Slovenia (Primorsko, Prekmurje). Thus it was the vicinity of Italy or Austria, in addition to economic reasons, which motivated the emigration of young people eager to achieve a higher standard of living. In 1963, when Yugoslav borders were opened up, the Slovenes became part of the free exchange of the European workforce and started leaving for "temporary work" in Western Europe. From there, some of them emigrated to Australia, while others became part of the chain migration and joined emigrant relatives. Most of them had vocational training and low-level skills. In the 1970s the Australian immigration program favored the better-educated because of a considerable decrease in demand for blue-collar

year-old carpenter apprentice Avgust Habič. They had been talked into this by Fran Podbevšek, a locksmith apprentice, who took over the girl in Nabrežina and took her by way of Geneva to Australia." ("Razgled po domovini," *Domoljub* (1988) 22).

¹² In 1924 the American government passed the Johnson-Reed Act which limited the number of new immigrants of a specific nationality "to the quota of 2% of members of a given nationality according to the U.S.A. census of 1910. 'The Golden Door' thus almost closed, restraining mass immigration from Europe to the U.S." (Drnovšek, 197).

¹³ After the early 1920s they emigrated because of the victory of fascism in Italy.

¹⁴ "1. slovenski izseljenski kongres v Ljubljani, dne 1. julija 1935," *Izseljenska knjižnica* 7 (Ljubljana: Družba sv. Rafaela, 1936) 71.

¹⁵ *Misli* 1/1 (1952) 9.

workers. The Slovene “brain drain” was confined to Western Europe, and hence there were no signs of it in Australia. Since 1975 there have been only individual cases of emigration to “the south land.”¹⁶

According to our statistics, as many as 25,000 Slovenes lived in Australia in 1990.¹⁷ And yet they are not among the most numerous ethnic groups which make up the approximately 15 millions of the extremely ethnically diverse Australian population. The majority of Slovenes live in larger cities on the coast such as Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Newcastle, Adelaide and Perth, but some also live in smaller cities inland (Mt. Isa), in the north (Darwin), and in the north-east (Cairns).

2. The Post-War Religious Life of Australian Slovenes

After this brief historical review we come to the post-war development and the role of the Slovene Catholic Church in the everyday life of Slovenes — above all in Sydney, and partly in Melbourne — and especially its beginnings. Save for a handful of popular articles,¹⁸ and even fewer professional contributions,¹⁹ there is no available literature on this subject. Therefore I had to rely on the contents of *Misli*,²⁰ a religious monthly published by Australian Slovenes since 1952, and on interviews with Slovenes living in Sydney conducted in the course of my stay there from 1981 to 1982.²¹

¹⁶ For more information about the reasons for their emigration, their journey to Australia, and their arrival in the new land in the period 1945–1980, see Breda Čebulj-Sajko, *Med srečo in svobodo: Avstralski Slovenci o sebi* (Ljubljana: published by the author, 1992) 50–80.

¹⁷ Jože Prešeren, “Izseljenci v Avstraliji,” *Enciklopedija Slovenije IV* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1990) 221.

¹⁸ Niko Žvokelj, “Vloga verskih središč v življenju avstralskih Slovencev,” Paper for the Slovene World Congress in Ljubljana, June 27, 1991, 27–29 (unpublished manuscript); Ciril Božič, “Pastoralno delo med Slovenci v Avstraliji,” *Slovenski svet* 7–8 (1993) 15–17; Breda Čebulj-Sajko, “A Survey of Different Forms of Institutionalized Activities of Slovenes in Australia, Especially in New South Wales,” *Svobodni razgovori* 10/4 (1992) 17–22; and “Društveno in versko življenje Slovencev v avstralski državi Novi Južni Wales,” *Slovenski svet* 7–8 (1993) 10–13.

¹⁹ Bogdan Kolar, “Cerkev in Slovenci po svetu,” *Zgodovina cerkve na Slovenskem* (Celje: Mohorjeva družba, 1991) 293–294.

²⁰ *Misli* 1/1 (1952) – 42/10 (1993).

²¹ All original recordings are kept at the Inštitut za slovensko izseljenstvo Znanstvenoraziskovalnega centra Slovenske akademije znanosti in

The Catholic Church in Australia was established on the basis of the mass immigration of Irish Catholics since the very beginning of colonization. It remained unchanged to the end of the Second World War and the influx of new immigrants, many of whom were Catholics of other national origins. They gradually became the largest religious group there, and the Australian Catholic Church started to lose its predominantly Irish character. Especially strong was the influence of the Maltese and Italians. Owing to them, the Australian Catholic Church started to accept elements of foreign traditions such as processions, the blessing of Easter foods, and so forth. In 1981 the Australian census noted that as many as one half of Australian Catholics were born outside Australia, and only 7% of these were of Anglo-Celtic origin.²² It was at least three decades before the 1980s that the need arose for priests speaking other languages than English who could work among the ethnically diversified ethnic groups of Australia. This was the birth of "emigrant chaplains" who were to be the bridge between the Australian Church and the new immigrants and were to perform their work until the assimilation of these New Australians. But since this Australian post-war assimilation did not occur and had to be replaced by multiculturalism due to the new influx of immigrants in the early seventies, the activities of the "emigrant chaplains" did not cease. In 1991, 167 Catholic immigrant priests were working in Australia, and most of them are still cultural and social workers in their communities.²³ Some of them have organized their own religious centres (of which there are twenty altogether). Three of these are Slovene: the oldest such centre is in Kew in Melbourne, and was consecrated in 1968; somewhat younger is the one in Merrylands, Sydney (consecrated in 1973), and the youngest is in Adelaide (consecrated in 1983). Aside from these, the Slovene organization *Planica* in Wollongong has its own church. Other Slovenes in Australia are regularly visited by Slovene priests from the above-mentioned religious centres which are incorporated into the *Slovenska dušnopastirska zveza v Avstraliji*.²⁴

I had four sources available with respect to how the organized work of Slovene Franciscans among the Slovenes in Australia

umetnosti in Ljubljana. All the interviews mentioned below are published in Čebulj-Sajko, *Med srečo in svobodo*.

²² Žvokelj, 27, quoting official census figures.

²³ Žvokelj, 28.

²⁴ Kolar, 293.

began: the first cites that “The first who were interested in them ... were the Franciscans. In 1951 Fr. Klavdij Okorn (1912-1979) and Fr. Beno Korbič arrived from the USA.”²⁵ The next item of information was written by two Franciscan fathers who worked among Slovenes in Melbourne and Sydney. Both agree that:

“Individuals from Australia ... started to ask in their letters to Dr. Gregorij Rožman, the late Bishop of Ljubljana who lived in Cleveland, USA, at that time, to act as a mediator and help them obtain priests. In their care for newcomers, the attention of the Australian authorities was drawn to the growing Slovene community of believers which did not have its own priest. Bishop Rožman finally contacted the leadership of Slovene Franciscans of the American Custody of the Holy Cross with its seat in Lemont (America’s Brezje). He asked for help for Australian Slovenes successfully, and Fr. Klavdij Okorn and Fr. Beno Korbič decided to start their religious work in Australia.”²⁶

Jože Čuješ, a post-war immigrant and the long-standing versatile organizer of Australian Slovenes, is also of the opinion that the initiative for Slovene priests was initiated by Slovenes in Australia and not by Franciscans at home:

“Well, as I have said before, we [Slovenes] started to get together in Sant Marys [a camp or a hostel for newcomers, in this case in Sydney] already at the end of the forties ... We usually met every Saturday. Some ten, twenty people came to my place ... These people ... were sick, had no insurance and so on ... So we helped each other. And thus we also cooperated as much as we wanted, working as a unit here in Australia. Well, and then we quickly quarrelled on account of politics, you know. First with the clergy. We namely realized that it was very difficult having no-one who could get out of the camp ... to visit Slovenes and learn something about home, you know ... ‘Well,’ we said, ‘the only one who could save us is a Slovene priest.’ ... Well, I wrote to America and got back the reply that none of I don’t know how many Slovene priests were willing to go to Australia. Well, that made our blood boil, let me tell you. Then, somehow, two Franciscans in America learned of this wish. And they volunteered to come here and help

²⁵ Kolar, 293.

²⁶ Žvokelj, 28; Božič, 15.

Slovenes ... They were Klavdij Okorn and Beno Korbič. Well, Fr. Beno was really something. Whatever he received or earned, he gave to the poor, to children ... Well, these two priests did a world of good for the Slovenes as a community. They also went from one hostel where the men lived and worked to other hostels where their wives and families lived. Carried money, mail and so on ... And once a month our camp had a Mass in Slovene; people came from everywhere. We sang that Mass. Then we had a bit to eat, to drink, we bought sausages, wine, bread, and we sang. And that was the beginning of our social life. These were the very first beginnings.”²⁷

Especially in this initial period of self-organizing and searching for other Slovenes who were spread throughout the whole Australian continent, the activities of both priests meant above all helping the needs of Slovene immigrants to get to know one another, to socialize and, at the same time, also the chance to organize social events. In 1953 the two priests returned to the U.S.A., but not before helping to establish *Misli*, one of the most widely read monthlies on religious and cultural life of Slovenes in Australia. This is how Mr. Čuješ remembers these beginnings in 1952:

“There was another friend with Glogovšek [a Slovene from Sydney], and both fathers, and another family. So we got together at that family’s place in Rozelle [a district of Sydney], and asked: ‘How could we bring Slovenes together?’ And we found out ... that the only way to do it is to make a newspaper. Even if we type it and copy it off by hand! So we asked around and found out that we didn’t need the permission of the state for a religious newspaper. But if we wanted to establish some other newspaper in another language, in Slovene, well, we couldn’t, then. It was forbidden. Well, and so we started to publish *Misli*, a religious newspaper ... Those who helped came to my place, and I typed it up, somebody else was running it off ... So we were sending *Misli* to eight hundred addresses throughout Australia. And it is still being published.”²⁸

In 1991, the print run of *Misli* was as high as 2,000 copies. After twenty years the editorial seat was moved from Sydney to

²⁷ Jože Čuješ, interview, Sydney 1981.

²⁸ Čuješ, interview.

Melbourne. Its editors changed according to the comings and goings of Slovene priests: Fr. Beno Korbič was replaced by Fr. Rudolf Pivko after a period of two years, between 1955 and 1972 the editor was Fr. Bernard Ambrožič, and since then Fr. Valentin Bazilij. As is evident from the contents of the newspaper's regular columns, which have not changed much in all these years, it satisfied various needs of the Slovene community and, at the same time, helped with the religious education of its readers. Aside from its religious contents, *Misli* also presents an enormous amount of information about everyday life and events among Australian Slovenes, in part it also reports of what is going on among other Slovene immigrants elsewhere, of important world and Australian events, of life in Slovenia, and it also offers personal accounts of individual Slovenes and their experiences in the Australian society; in addition, there are numerous advertisements, and so on.

The basic goal of *Misli*, which is unchanged since the very first issue, is certainly to bring Australian Slovenes together. On analyzing the contents of the monthly, it is possible to establish on which levels this process was going on, how it affected the everyday life of those who had felt it, and what the role of religion was. I will follow these problems in the continuation of the chronological description of the activities of Australian Slovenes, especially those living in Sydney and its surroundings.

Even in its first year when there were not yet any Slovene associations in Australia, *Misli* established an important connection among Slovenes. This is reflected in the published letters of its readers, who were amazed at how many Slovenes lived in Australia, and forwarded yet more new addresses to the editor. At the same time the monthly started to publish advertisements in which Slovenes searched for one another, looking mainly for those who had arrived in Australia with them but had to separate from them because they had different places of employment. There were also numerous inquiries after "vanished" relatives who had not written to their relatives for a long time. But the most acute problem in this first phase of getting to know one another, however, was reflected in marriage proposals of young Slovene men asking the editor for addresses of Slovene girls. This is fully understandable if we keep in mind that those who had come to Australia were mainly young single men who had not seen any perspective future in Slovenia and had had to accept even the most difficult physical labor in "the promised land." These marriage proposals are but an additional proof of their physical, and even

more of their psychological loneliness and isolation which were extremely evident in this period. The kinship level of connection can also be followed through the column entitled "Poroke, krsti, smrti." Ethnically-mixed marriages of Slovenes were still very rare in the fifties. But an analysis of four decades of their life in Australia reveals the gradual change in the ethnic origin of spouses, more and more frequent English names for children born to Slovene parents, and the aging of Slovene emigrants in Australia. Due to all three functions performed by Slovene priests amidst their congregation (marriages, baptisms and funerals), the above-men-tioned column also reveals more and more frequent ceremonies of this kind among those who were not Slovene.

Misli has thus represented a kind of springboard for the further organized socializing of Slovenes. Informal, spontaneous socializing was replaced by social events combined with celebrations of religious holidays about which the monthly regularly informed its readers. One of the first was in Saint Marys hostel in Sydney in 1952, when Fr. Beno and Fr. Klavdij organized a midnight Mass.²⁹ Next year the editorial board of *Misli* organized the first public Slovene evening with a cultural program consisting of a male chorus, accordeon players, and reciters of Slovene poems. The 500 guests were thrilled with the "real Slovene sausages, sauerkraut and wine."³⁰ This meeting resulted in the organization of the *Zveza Slovencev v Sydneyu*³¹ which soon established branches in other Australian towns with a larger population of Slovenes. Gradually those social gatherings, which were based on religion, began to differ from those which were not. But both, nevertheless, were the result of the same need: the need to communicate in one's native tongue. Those who lived too far to be able to attend these gatherings received the Slovene word from Dr. Ivan Mikula, a diocesan priest from Carinthia. As soon as he came to Australia in 1952, he started his work in Western Australia, then moved to Sydney and visited Slovenes in the interior from there. He also took care of the connection between Australian Slovenes and Mohorjeva družba, a religious publishing house in Celovec/Klagenfurt, Austria, and Slovenska kulturna akcija in Argentina. Both sent him Slovene books on a regular basis, which could then be bought by anyone interested in reading them.

²⁹ *Misli* 1/1 (1952) 9.

³⁰ *Misli* 2/5 (1953) 6.

³¹ *Slovenska kronika* 1 (1954) 2.

In the middle of the fifties, with the arrival of Fr. Bernard Ambrožič in Sydney and Fr. Valentin Bazilij in Melbourne, the activities of Slovene Franciscans in Australia became more widespread. Fr. Bazilij covered Slovenes in Victoria, Southern Australia and Tasmania. It is because of this extraordinary man that the first Slovene religious centre on the fifth continent was built in Kew, Melbourne. At first this was the *Baragov dom* with the Saint Cyril and Methodius Church, a hall, and, later on, the *Slomškova šola* (a religious institution teaching Slovene and some basic facts about Slovenia), a library, a *Slomškov dom* for nuns and, as the newest addition, the *Dom počitka matere Romane* for senior Slovenes. Since the great majority of Slovenes disembarked in Melbourne, Fr. Bazilij met them at that harbor, inviting them to stay in the Baraga House as their first home:

“Here they received shelter, a roof over their head, food, the company of fellow Slovenes, also a library, they played different games there, table tennis and sports and so on. They were in familiar surroundings even though most of them worked in Australian factories and workshops and in different trades. They were carpenters, they were locksmiths, they were turners and mechanics.”³²

According to Fr. Jenko, Fr. Ambrožič offered similar help in Sydney:

“There was no ... Slovene hostel ... But there were individuals, fellow Slovenes who offered, so to speak, familiar foods and lodgings to our boys ... The priest knew them, and when somebody new arrived and didn't want to stay in the state hostel, well, so he left. Father sent him to our people, so ... he was able to communicate in Slovene with the master of the house and others who were living there.”³³

Fr. Ambrožič also took care of Slovenes living in Canberra and Newcastle. Since they did not then have their own halls, Slovenes gathered in rented halls. Especially well-known were the Padding-ton Church Hall and the Woollahara House, both in Eastern Sydney where the majority of Sydney Slovenes lived. They frequented social evenings of the Association of Slovenes, many came to pilgrimages and religious holiday celebrations which abounded in traditions from home. *Misli* regularly notified

³² Fr. Valerijan Jenko, interview, Sydney, 1982.

³³ Jenko, interview.

its readers about these events. Fr. Ambrožič, however, did not care only for religious matters. He “provided jobs for many a newcomer because he spoke English and had more connections with, you know, Australians, and also with Slovenes who had come here earlier, you know.”³⁴ It was also owing to him that Slovene schools were organized in those parts of Sydney where Slovenes lived. He himself was the leader of two such schools: the one in Paddington and the one in Blacktown.

With the arrival of Fr. Odilo Hajnšek in 1961, the cultural life initiated by Slovene Franciscans became more diversified. In addition to organizing the still functioning Slomšek School in 1962, Fr. Jenko told me that Fr. Hajnšek had “organized the first Slovene orchestra ... He also provided a teacher for it, and so they rehearsed for various dances and other events. Of course, other bands evolved from this orchestra later on.”³⁵ He also initiated the first Slovene theatrical group in Sydney. It worked as a part of the then *Slovensko društvo Sydney*, which had replaced the Association of Slovenes. One of their first stage hits was a play by Fran Saleški Finžgar, *Veriga*, in 1961. Jože Čuješ wrote the following about the play: “Since the Association has neither its hall nor its stage, we had to improvise the scenery. But our goal was never to compete with the Drama Theatre of Ljubljana, or with anybody else. We only wanted to prove that it is possible to stage a Slovene play in Sydney despite all the difficulties and obstacles, if only people are willing to contribute their own share.”³⁶ The attendance was very poor, but still Fr. Ambrožič encouraged the players, organizing another performance together with Dr. Mikula (see FIGURE I).³⁷

The reason for such poor attendance at events whose goal was primarily cultural and less social was the way of life immigrants had led prior to their emigration. Most of them had not frequented the theatre, concerts, and so on. It is therefore not strange that they had brought this part of their tradition to Australia as well. It is also highly possible to link this to their low level of education and the rural background which had evoked such needs only in very few of them. Another reason was elucidated by Fr. Jenko,

³⁴ Jenko, interview.

³⁵ Jenko, interview.

³⁶ Ludvik Klakoč er, “Finžgarjeva *Veriga* v Sydneyu,” *Misli* 10/10 (1961) 8.

³⁷ Klakoč er, 8.

SYDNEY! N.S.W. SYDNEY!

Upon the invitation of the Slovene 'CARITAS' Association the players
of the Slovene Association shall repeat

T H E C H A I N

in St. Francis Church Hall in Paddington on Saturday, September 2,
1961, at 7:30 p.m. Afterwards the music of domestic accordeon

Entrance fee: 10 shil. for men 5 shil. for women

The endeavours of the actors and
the 90th anniversary of the writer FINŽGAR
deserve a full hall!

All of you are invited by: Dr. Ivan Mikula
Fr. Bernard Ambrožič

FIGURE 1: ADVERTISEMENT FOR VERIGA

together with his dissatisfaction with the fact that very few Slovene immigrants frequented libraries:

“As a matter of fact I could say that our library had very poor attendance. I was never satisfied with the fact that people were just not used to reading. When they came to Australia, all started working right away. So some held two jobs, and it was natural that they had no time nor energy for reading and similar stuff. After two jobs they were ready only to rest as much as possible, you know.”³⁸

In Sydney, but also elsewhere, Slovene Franciscans have always been the organizers of the majority of cultural events. It is my opinion that, in order to attract the audience the cultural

³⁸ Jenko, interview.

element of these events began to be mixed with entertainment. Only regular Sunday Masses and larger religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter have preserved an exclusively religious character.

If we compare the Slovene Church in Sydney to the one in Melbourne, the development of the former was somewhat different: it acquired its location after Slovenes in Sydney had settled down in different districts. There were no dense settlements here. It is true, though, that the majority moved from the eastern to the western part of the city, away from the above-mentioned rented halls. Fr. Jenko, who in 1963 took over the leadership of the Slovene Church in New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory, and Queensland but whose base always remained in Sydney, took into consideration the dispersion of Slovenes in the city when he was looking for the best location for a religious centre. With the aid of money collected among his believers, he bought two hundred gravesites in the Australian Memorial Park – later known as the Australian *Žale* – and, in 1969, an old Presbyterian church in Merrylands. After it had been restored, the Sydney Slovenes thus obtained their *Velesovo*, their religious centre. In the following years they purchased additional land, built a new church – St. Raphael's Church – on the site of the old one, acquired two additional houses for nuns and an apartment for the priest, and have recently built a hall. Prior to this, social events took place in rented halls, since the Sydney Slovene Association was the only one with its own, albeit provisional, hall. Despite all this, the Church became the focus of socializing. One should, however, not overestimate this fact. Some were extremely disappointed with its activities, among them Pavla Gruden, a well-known Slovene-Australian poet:

“Then I started to write for *Misli*. Which means that I reviewed books coming from Argentina and wrote little poems about Slovenia. But since this was their paper, they – the priests – had total control over us. There were articles against Yugoslavia. But I got hold of some proofs that life in Yugoslavia was very different from the one described by the priests ... I demanded freedom of the press from the editor – the priest. Even though we were friends in personal life, he took away my typewriter that very same day and completely expelled me from the Slovene community.

I felt very bitter and haven't mingled with Slovenes for ten years."³⁹

She does, however, grant that Slovene priests played an important role in the cultural life of their fellow-countrymen, even though this is expressed according to her own point of view:

"The only true thing is the cultural life around the Church. Wherever the Church gathers its believers, there are cultural events going on. That is the truth. Why? I don't know, why. But the Church tries real hard to increase the number of its members and butters up the people with a cultural event of some sort. If nothing else, there are processions; or a church chorus; or a small newspaper, and so on."⁴⁰

Those seeking support in order to survive felt a more natural inclination towards the events connected with the Slovene Church:

"We didn't miss even one Sunday Mass. I sang in a church chorus back home, and started here right away. That's eighteen years ago, and I still sing there, you know. This is a part of my life. I never condemn a person for going to church, or for not going, for that matter. Each acts according to their own conscience. But for me and for my family, this was a must."⁴¹

There were already five Franciscan fathers among some 10,000-15,000 Australian Slovenes in the 1960s.⁴² It is impossible to overlook the fact that it was because of them that the first official visit from Slovenia to Australia was arranged. At the time when the Slovene government had not yet established official contacts with Slovene immigrants in Australia, Bishop Janez Jenko arrived for a visit in 1968. It was only after three years that this visit was followed by one from the *Slovenska izseljenska matica* in Ljubljana. It is true that the ideological polarization of Slovenes – at least those living in Sydney – had existed even before these two visits, but it became institutionalized at the beginning of the seventies. Part of the then pro-Yugoslav Slovene immigrants established their own club, *Triglav*, and also official contacts with

³⁹ Pavla Gruden, interview, Sydney, 1982.

⁴⁰ Gruden, interview.

⁴¹ Marica Ovijač, interview, Sydney 1981.

⁴² *Misli* 11/4 (1963) 7.

Slovenia through the *Slovenska izseljenska matica*. Similar contacts were established in other Australian cities as well.⁴³

Despite this new situation, the Church has maintained its position and role in the religious life of Australian Slovenes. Regardless of their membership in this or that association, the majority keep politics separate from religion. It can be said that it was only during the time when there were three different Slovene organizations (Sydney Slovene Association, the Triglav Club and the Velesovo) that the primary importance of the Church as the carrier of the Catholic religion started to be felt. Its social, cultural and entertainment functions were, of course, still important, but at least the entertainment function was taken assumed by other associations and clubs.

It is true that Slovenes living abroad were never completely homogenous, and that this more or less reflected the situation in Slovenia, but their homogeneity has never been in question when their relationship towards Australia was concerned. This is reflected in the case of the organization of Slovene schools and ethnic radio broadcasts, in the past as well as today; all Slovene organizations and priests in Sydney take part in these activities. *Slovenski šolski odbor za Novi Južni Wales* was established in 1978 in Merrylands, and its seat has remained there. Alfred Brežnik, one of its long-standing presidents, is of the opinion that "There are no problems in the Board, regardless from which association one comes. We have excellent cooperation, and there has not been one quarrel in all these years."⁴⁴ Slovene radio broadcasts on the 2EA Ethnic Radio have had since their beginning in 1975 a religious, informative, and cultural/entertainment character.

It is thus evident that concern for the preservation of their own national identity and its transmission to the young is the strongest tie connecting Slovene immigrants in Australia, regardless of their religious or political convictions. Slovene Franciscans see yet another dimension in carrying out this mission: "With the preservation of old religious customs, the Mass in Slovene, and the possibility to receive sacraments in their native tongue, Slovenes have preserved and evolved the Christian tradition of European

⁴³ More about this can be found in the report of the *Slovenska izseljenska matica*: "Poročilo o obisku delegacije Slovenske izseljenske matice in Slakovega ansambla pri slovenskih izseljencih v Avstraliji," (Ljubljana: Slovenska izseljenska matica, 1972) (unpublished manuscript).

⁴⁴ Alfred Brežnik, interview, Sydney 1982.

countries, thus enriching the Australian Church in their own way."⁴⁵ There are, however, two levels of this preservation and the further development of Christian traditions:

The first is the formal, physical presence within the Slovene Church, in which believers publicly manifest their adherence to the Catholic religion by taking part in religious ceremonies. This is most frequent during religious holidays, and Fr. Jenko expressed the following opinion:

“The largest crowds gather at Christmas, and this is because it is an official state holiday in Australia as well ... They come to church. Up to one thousand Slovenes come to midnight Mass [in Sydney] ... The second largest assembly is ... for Easter. We have quite a nice attendance on Good Friday, this being a state holiday. And then they gather the day after Easter, when there is dancing and entertainment. Well, a lot of them also come ... to the cemetery on the first Sunday of November, on an All Saints Day of a sort. And the relatives. All of them come. Many also come on the day of the first communion, and on St. Raphael's Day, since he is our patron ... Then they also come on St. Mary's Day. A lot of them celebrate the Ascension Day and the Assumption Day. Then they also celebrate the Corpus Christi Day, and the Epiphany. Children come the day before Palm Sunday to make their Easter bundles ...”⁴⁶

At the second level, the Christian tradition is also being preserved in more personal, private everyday lives. If we consider the fact that about 5,000 Slovenes live in Sydney, and about one fifth of them attend Catholic church services on a more or less regular basis, we see that the rest preserve their religious traditions and celebrate holidays above all within their own families. More than a deep religious belief, this is a blend of their past religious upbringing and the traditional Slovene culture which is based on Christianity.⁴⁷ The religious practice of Australian Slovenes is thus as follows: among approximately 70 Slovene families which I visited in Sydney and Wollongong, there were none who did not

⁴⁵ Žvokelj, 29.

⁴⁶ Jenko, interview.

⁴⁷ Cf. Niko Kuret, *Praznično leto Slovencev I-II*, 1st reprint (Celje: Mohorjeva družba, 1989).

celebrate one or another religious holiday, while only one third of them regularly went to church.⁴⁸

Fr. Jenko sees the following reasons for this situation:

“We should, of course, consider the following factors: ... the distance from religious centres ... Then, secondly, ... the companionship that they had sought in the Church at the beginning is now available through different Slovene associations. Since there are some who go to church also in order to be together with other Slovenes, right? Then there are those who had never been used to Sunday Masses, and they did not get used to them here either ...”⁴⁹

Objective reasons for these infrequent visits to religious centres are contrary to the actual maintenance of religion within one's family:

“Oh, no, we do not go to church ... The only thing we do celebrate is Christmas: the wife bakes something, a potica or something, since these are really old customs.”⁵⁰

Slovenes try to preserve the value of the family in the Australian way of life (which Australians themselves consider to be rather American). In this way, celebrations of religious holidays remain one of the few occasions when families can get together. Not only the preservation of Christian traditions, but also and above all the way of life of the kinship communities in which the immigrants had lived prior to emigration, have been transferred to Australia in this way.

3. Conclusion

To summarize: we may conclude that after some four decades of its existence, the Slovene community in Sydney does not maintain its interest in socializing within its Church-based associations with the same fervor as it did during the time of its formation. This is very likely true of the Slovene communities in other Australian cities as well. Adaptation to new circumstances and new surroundings, the formation of a family of one's own, and the attainment of a certain social status have all resulted in the

⁴⁸ Breda Čebulj-Sajko, “Terenski zapiski,” Sydney 1981/82.

⁴⁹ Jenko, interview.

⁵⁰ Vlado Celin, interview, Wollongong 1982.

greater independence of Slovene immigrants with which they fulfill their cultural, social, and other needs. As we have seen, the first generation was able to fulfill a part of these needs also with the help of the Slovene Franciscans and of religious centres. Its children, who are above all Australians, and only then Slovenes, are now growing up. Slovene priests on the fifth continent⁵¹ are of the same opinion when they maintain that their work is oriented “chiefly towards the elderly ... Younger ones (born in Australia) are becoming removed from Slovene culture and language, and also from the Church (as is the case with the large majority of Australian youth).”⁵² The fact described in this last phrase, although it is written in parentheses, is perhaps the most important when one speculates about the destiny of the Slovene culture, whose important mediator is undoubtedly also the Slovene Church, in Australia in the future: the majority of Slovene youth have become Australianized. The generation of children of the first American Slovenes testify that this is the natural course of assimilation which cannot be prevented by any institution, only by the individual himself. It was when Božo Škerlj, the Slovene anthropologist, was among American Slovenes in 1952 that he reflected on these problems: “Is there any such thing as the problem of Slovene-American immigration? Namely: is this problem real for these immigrants, or only for us back home? Of course it is painful for us to lose yet the second generation. But: is this being perceived as painful by Slovene immigrants themselves?”⁵³

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⁵¹ Aside from those mentioned above, the following priests also worked in Australia: Fr. Filip Inocenc Feryan, Adelaide (1975–1980); Fr. Stanko Zemljak, Melbourne (1969–1980); Fr. Lavrencij Anžel, Sydney (1975–1979); Fr. Bernard Goličnik, Melbourne (1983–1984); Fr. Janez Tretjak, Adelaide (1980–); Fr. Ciril Božič, Sydney, Melbourne and Wollongong (1982–1992); Fr. Tone Gorjup, Melbourne (1986–1989, 1992–); and Fr. Niko Žvokelj, Melbourne (1990–1992). Helping them since 1966 were the Slovene Immaculate Sisters. Four Slovene Franciscans have remained in Australia (one in Sydney, two in Melbourne, and one in Adelaide) and two of the sisters have remained in Sydney (see Božič, 16).

⁵² Božič, 17.

⁵³ Božo Škerlj, *Neznana Amerika* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1955) 31.

POVZETEK

VERSKO ŽIVLJENJE SLOVENCEV V AVSTRALIJI

Začetki izseljevanja Slovencev v Avstralijo segajo v obdobje na prelomu našega stoletja. Sprva so bili to le posamezniki, po zmagi fašizma v Italiji večje skupine Primorcev, po letu 1945 pa prvi politični emigranti. Številnejše, dasi ilegalno odhajanje Slovencev v Avstralijo se prične šele v petdesetih letih. Višku tega procesa v sredini šestdesetih let sledi postopno upadanje, katerega trend se doslej ni bistveno spremenil. Tako so danes Slovenci le ena manjših etničnih skupin v izredno pisani multikulturni avstralski družbi (kakah 25,000). V življenju slovenskih Avstralcev zavzemajo posebno mesto slovenski frančiškani, ki delujejo v Avstraliji od leta 1951 dalje. Njihovo poslanstvo med rojaki ni nikoli imelo le verski značaj. Slovenski frančiškani v Avstraliji so vedno bili tudi vodilni socialni in kulturno-prosvetni delavci; s svojimi verskimi in družabnimi prireditvami so vedno skušali povezovati slovensko skupnost po vsej avstralski celini. S tem namenom so leta 1952 osnovali versko-kulturni mesečnik Misli, ki danes izhaja v nakladi 2,000 izvodov. Analiza njegove vsebine nudi bralcu vpogled v začetke formiranja slovensko-avstralske skupnosti, v problematiko nadaljnega razvoja lastne identitete ter upadanje interesa druge generacije avstralskih Slovencev tako za versko kot društveno delovanje v svoji sredi.