

LAUGHING IN THE JUNGLE: THE WRITER AS HERO

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Recently (1972), Michael Novak in *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* describes an episode that Louis Adamic took part in, redoing the account from *Laughing in the Jungle*,¹ making it even more dramatic than Adamic had and comparing it in passing to the Kent State tragedy.

In Lublyana [sic], at the city school, [Novak writes] Adamic took part in a student demonstration against Austrian rule. Many in Slovenia were resentful; students expressed what others did not dare. In broad daylight, mobs of students dashed through the streets. They pulled down German signs from above the entrances to stores. . . . On one particular day in May, several hundred students carried the Slovenian colors through the streets. They had no permit for their march. They sang and shouted. . . . On a side street, a detachment of Austrian cavalry with drawn sabers waited in ambush. When they charged, one student threw a rock. The lieutenant called, "Fire!" The streets were full of prancing soldiers and panicky boys who raced for doorways, cafes, turns in the street. Adamic's best friend Yanko was a step or two ahead when a bullet blasted his skull. He fell dead. Adamic sprawled over the bloody form.

Within two minutes, it was over. The toll was only half that of Kent State: two were dead, four or five wounded.

Adamic, still sprawled over the warm body of his friend, was picked up by the soldiers and thrown into jail. His dead friend Yanko became a national hero; the whole city turned out for his funeral. The Imperial Government barred Adamic from ever attending any educational institution. He was fourteen years old.²

After reading Novak, I went back to Adamic's original account of the episode. Adamic tells us in his autobiography, *Laughing in the Jungle* (1932), how he became involved in the anti-Austrian movement just before World War I. After his first student year he had found that Ljubljana was after all a dull little baroque city, so he and

a friend took to the illicit fun of visiting meetings of clandestine anti-Hapsburg organizations that featured older intellectual speakers, one of whom may have been Dr. Ivan Lah, the Slovene writer. At night the youths also disported themselves by chalking up nasty things about the Austrian government on walls.

However, their youthful pranks took a somber turn, he says, during a demonstration in November 1913 when two students were killed, one his friend, a carefree youth much like himself. Adamic was arrested and jailed briefly. As a result of this escapade he was barred from the school, and by December he had persuaded his parents to allow him to emigrate to America, a country which had been much in his young mind as another source of adventure.³

After I read Novak and Adamic I became interested enough to begin reading Lah in Slovene.⁴ After all, Lah had been almost a neighbor of Adamic's. However, I was disappointed to find that Lah in his memoirs (1925) says nothing about Adamic or the 1913 demonstration or its tragic consequences, although he does make important references to a similar affair of 1908 which affected him deeply. But unlike Adamic, Lah was not a participant, even though he was entirely in sympathy with the demonstration. The outcome was very much like what Adamic described and Novak discussed in his book. Two young men were shot down by the Austrian military. They became martyrs; there was a great public outcry against the murders, followed by a huge public funeral. This event became a symbol in Lah's mind—a kind of Slovene Boston Massacre.

So important in fact was this event to Lah that he devotes the first two chapters of his memoirs to it. His book begins as he sits talking to a friend, both of them working for the city government as clerks processing allotments for the families of men drafted into the Austrian army in a war already two months old, and several months before Lah was imprisoned as a political suspect. Lah wonders whether there will be any visitors to a certain grave the next day. After several more refrain-like literary references to that day, we read at chapter's end:

“Tomorrow is the twentieth of September.”

“God knows, if anyone will visit the graves.”

“I'm going to.”

This laconic exchange worthy of Hemingway is explained by a flashback at the beginning of Chapter Two.

That day in the year 1908 [Lah begins] I was not in Ljubljana. I was living at Rivi on Lake Garda . . . tutoring a

lively six-year-old boy, yellow-haired and sturdy. Things were going especially well with us. All day we had been walking along the peaceful shore of the blue lake which spilled among the forests. . . .

These were wonderful days. Some time in the afternoon, I was playing in the courtyard with the boy. On the balcony sat the mistress reading *Zeit*.

“There are demonstrations in Ljubljana,” the lady said.

I looked up.

“The soldiers were shooting.”

The ball flew past, and the little boy laughed.

“You didn’t catch it.”

“Two are dead, and more are wounded,” the mistress read on.

The master of the house appeared on the balcony—an Austrian officer. He was a good soul. Well-liked by everyone. He spoke Slovene very well because he had spent much time in Ljubljana . . . and he was interested in literature. He fell at Galicia, in the first years of the war.

“Why didn’t they fire into the air?” asked his lady.

“When there is shooting, the shooting is for keeps,” he replied.

I thought he looked rather sad at the bloody news. The lady left for a walk.

I picked up the newspaper and read. That’s how it was that day.⁵

So Lah was not in the city in 1908 when those dreadful and heroic deeds were going forward. There is a slight twinge of guilt in Lah’s recollection. He should have been there with the rest, taking chances for the national honor. It was, after all, his cause. Thus, the chapter makes much of the irony of his enjoying a tranquil afternoon while others in the city were demonstrating and dying.

We turn back now to Adamic’s account for a close-up look at the 1913 affair in *Laughing in the Jungle*, so curiously like Lah’s in certain details. Adamic writes of “our third gymnasium year” when he and his friend Yanko Rudin “joined in a secret student political club affiliated with the general Yugoslav nationalist movement that had sprung up . . . five or six years before the outbreak of the world war.” He describes the climax of his involvement in the youth demonstration on that November day, thus:

In a moment the mounted soldiers were upon us with drawn sabers.

Then one of the hotheads from our midst hurled a rock, . . . whereupon an officer commanded: "Fire!"

Suddenly Yanko, who was running ahead of me, dropped. He was dead, a bullet in his head.

I stumbled over him and fell. . . .

Then the firing ceased. The total casualties were two dead, four or five wounded.

Adamic tells us that his fame or notoriety as a participant preceded him to America, where in New York an editor of a Slovene paper asked him to write an account of the demonstration for the paper, which he says he did, his first piece of writing in America.⁷

In 1928 Lah wrote a history, *The Struggle for Yugoslavia*, which Adamic may have read, in which he summarized South Slavism—from Napoleon's occupation to the establishment of Yugoslavia. He also described the 1908 demonstration and the events that brought it about, in some detail. A cultural group composed of Slovene students, more militant than previous ones, was to hold a meeting in Ptuj. They were met at the station by townspeople sympathetic to the Germanization of Slovenia, who pelted them with rocks and clods of mud all the way to the meeting hall because they were "Pan-Slavists." Those who tried to defend themselves were arrested by the Austrian police. When news of this outrageous treatment by German sympathizers reached Ljubljana, the whole Slovene populace was aroused. At hastily organized meetings, speakers cried out for justice and vengeance against this national insult to their peaceful students. Soon rioting broke out, and for three days symbols of the hated Germans were destroyed or torn down throughout the city. Finally the Austrian government called out soldiers, police, and militia in an attempt to stem the riot. Then, Lah continues,

On the evening of the third day, rifles began cracking in front of the main church, and the first bloody sacrifices in the battle for freedom fell in Ljubljana's streets. There were two dead—*Lunder and Adamic*—a small example for other Yugoslavonic regions, but a most important example for a nation that up till that time had fought for its existence only with cultural means. These September events echoed deep in the soul of the whole nation, which realized that it was without rights in its own land.⁸

Lah then tells of the protests that came from all over the Slavic world. The funeral of the martyrs was attended by forty thousand people—the whole city. Condolences came from cities like Belgrade

and Prague. In protest, the Czech ministers resigned from the Austrian parliament.

Lah believed this event could have been a turning point in the fight for freedom, and he had hoped it would break the blind allegiance to Austria and the clerical party. But then the church party intervened, denouncing the “deplorable” demonstrations from the pulpit. Far from being a rallying point for freedom, the church declared, the demonstration really expressed the work of those who wanted to weaken Austria—Serbian propagandists. The majority of the Slovene people listened and promptly went back to their conservative ways, rejecting this great explosion of national frustration. The reactionary leaders of the people, says Lah, blindly led them down the wrong road once again. Alas, the question of whether the nation was going to wait for the tender mercy of Austria or turn towards the South and freedom was answered.⁹ Obviously, Lah was disappointed by the response. I have said the demonstrations described by Lah and Adamic were surprisingly similar, but most surprising is the fact that in Lah’s account *Adamic was the name of one of the two martyrs*.

Who was this Adamic? Surely not Louis Adamic. But even more confusing, a year after Lah’s description appeared, Adamic also referred to a demonstration in an *American Mercury* article called “The Land of Laughs.”

As a young student in Carniola, [he said], I have engaged in Austrian revolutionary doings. A young relative, a namesake of mine, had been shot by the Austrian cavalry in a Slavic demonstration in which I participated. I had been a Yugoslav nationalist, a Pan-Slavist, and what-not, and with such a past, it was, I think, inevitable that I would succumb to Dr. Wilson’s periodic bursts of rhetoric.¹⁰

If this somewhat flippant, even cynical statement is a reference to the 1908 event, as appears likely, then Adamic was in two demonstrations in which Slovene patriots were killed. But in 1908 Adamic was only about nine years old; he would have been a very youthful participant, indeed. Adamic did not become a student in Ljubljana until at least a year and a half later. But, of course, the event must have been much talked and read about, and still fresh in the mind of many when Adamic came up to Ljubljana. But how the youth could have been Adamic’s namesake is not clear.

By 1942 in *What’s Your Name*, Adamic, somewhat forgetfully, distanced himself a little from the bloody demonstration, but provides more detail:

. . . Shortly before my departure for the United States a young man named Ivan Adamic, a relative of mine, had been killed by the Austrian military in a Yugoslav-nationalist student demonstration in the streets of Lyublyana [sic], the provincial capital. He was thereafter a kind of martyr-hero to large sections of the Slovenian nation, and his picture draped in black crepe hung in homes all over the country. Partly because he had been killed so dramatically and partly because he had been Adamic, this martyr-hero played quite a role in my mental and emotional processes in America. He was subtly instrumental in rousing my enthusiasm for President Wilson's idea to make the world safe for democracy and he had, I suspect, a good deal to do with my joining the United States Army. And very possibly it was the memory of him that prodded me into signing my application for enlistment as Adamič with a disproportionately large hook over the *c*.¹¹

We note that Adamic is now no longer even a participant. When I was working on the Adamic papers at Princeton, I came across a typewritten speech apparently never published, which Adamic had made to various groups in the late '40's. It was written in 1947, just a few years before his death, and provides still another reference to a pre-World War I demonstration. I quote from my taped account:

I was not quite fifteen when I came to America in 1913, the year Woodrow Wilson moved into the White House, but for a couple of years before—as a student at a secondary school in Ljubljana, the small capital city of tiny Slovenia, then still part of Austria—I had hung out spiritually on the fringes of the so-called Yugoslav movement. This was the movement aimed to help topple over the Austrian-Hungarian empire and bring the Slovenians, Croats and Serbians—all the Yugoslavs—then some forgotten fifteen million, into one state of their own. My own exposure to the Yugoslav movement in 1912 or thereabouts influenced my later life. I suspect that its ideals are still a factor within me. *I remembered that when I was a boy, a distant cousin of our family, a boy of twenty with the same family name as ours, was shot dead by soldiers during an anti-Austrian mass demonstration—an incident which affected me very deeply.*

Adamic goes on to speak further about “the impulse of Yugoslav unity and freedom.” Then he says, “I mention this to help you

see how I got this way, to help you decide more readily whether to accept or reject my views." This, I believe, is Adamic's last written reference to the demonstration in which two youths were killed but in 1908, not in 1913. True, he no longer claims to have been a participant in the event as he did in *Jungle*, but certainly we would have to agree that it did have a very remarkable effect on him, and that it had developed a symbolic value for him just as it had for Lah. Ironically, however, neither Adamic or Lah took part—Lah because he was not in the city that day, and Adamic because he was too young. But to both of them it represented a high point of Slovene resistance against Germanism within the Austrian empire, and, as such, the first blow struck by Slovenes for South Slavism that included that all-important ingredient, human sacrifice. In fact this seems to be the only instance of death in a political street demonstration in Ljubljana before World War I.

Let us now turn our attention to the methods of the two writers, Lah and Adamic. In his novels and dramas, Lah was quite willing to play fast and loose with historical facts. I have translated one of these. However, he made a special point of declaring in the preface of his first volume of memoirs that "it was not necessary to embroider or to exaggerate" because "this is how it actually was."¹² Adamic, on the other hand, used the methods of the historical novelist in his autobiography as he did later in *Cradle of Life*. In part, he used a technique that writers employ when they report events as if they were observers. But Adamic went farther in *Laughing in the Jungle*, like a *Time* magazine reporter, suggesting an actual witness, personalizing events to give them a greater depth and immediacy. We remember that Adamic had said in 1947 that he had "hung out spiritually on the fringes of the movement." But in 1932 his method really demanded that he move to the center of the action. It is a method that leads an author into becoming "a player in his own book," as Adamic's friend Vladimir Dedijer has said.¹³ Dedijer thought that technique dangerous, one to be avoided, one belonging to the creation of fiction. But Adamic obviously did not. A footnote in Adamic's posthumous book, *The Eagle and the Roots*, is revealing: "Taking the liberties of a novelist, almost (believing the novelist often approaches truth more closely than most historians), I tried to give . . . self-interpretive equivalents."¹⁴ In fact in several other places in his writing Adamic makes the point that the value of the truth lies in the special kind of dramatization a writer applies to it. Is the implication then that the writer need not be afraid to manipulate facts in order to yield the greater truth?¹⁵ At any rate, I believe that Adamic, in his *Laughing in the Jungle*, through a kind of wishful blurring of events, an over-identification, produced what Alex Haley

has recently called “faction,” a blend of fact and fiction. Adamic was not in the demonstration in which the two youths were killed, although he may have been in others before World War I. The death of Yanko Rudin was a fiction also.

Laughing in the Jungle was reviewed in magazines and newspapers across the nation. Yet with one exception, none of the reviewers in 1932, anymore than Michael Novak much later, knew enough about Slovene history to challenge Adamic’s exciting 1913 version of the 1908 demonstration in Ljubljana. However, Ivan Molek, editor of *Prosveta*, then (1932) Adamic’s friend and chief literary booster among Slovenes in America, did object to Adamic’s account. Molek pointed out in his review, written in Slovene, that Adamic’s admirable book was so important for Slovenes that he was honor bound to examine both its virtues and its defects. While he found writing talent in abundance, he said Adamic’s account of the demonstration did not square with the truth, and he could not understand why Adamic had “connected himself with the . . . riot,” and furthermore, why he had moved the year from 1908 to 1913. “Slovene readers,” he said, “would find the whole matter a riddle.”¹⁶ But Molek did not go the next logical step, which was to point out that Adamic had other problems with fact. Just one example: Adamic says in *Laughing in the Jungle* that his first written work in America was an account of the putative 1913 demonstration, for a Slovene language newspaper in New York; and, in fact, that the editor had assigned the article because Adamic’s part in the demonstration as reported in the Ljubljana newspapers had reached America before he did. None of the above—and much that follows—could possibly be true.

In his own posthumous autobiography, translated in 1979, Ivan Molek, now Adamic’s bitter enemy, refers to what he considers the brazen manipulation of history again, for which he “sharply chided” [Adamic] “in a letter.” Adamic replied “that the episode about the Ljubljana demonstration was only for the American public and not for Slovenes.”¹⁷ According to Molek, then, Adamic was not only laughing in the jungle but up his sleeve as well.

Molek also writes that Adamic, visiting Yugoslavia in 1932, “identified himself with the Adamic who had been killed in 1908,” in a sketch which had been translated and published in the most prestigious Slovene literary periodical, *Ljubljanski Zvon*.¹⁸

Of course, the obvious answer to Molek’s questions about why Adamic reworked the facts of the demonstration to include himself and his fictitious friend, Yanko, is not much of a riddle, really. Adamic’s revision of history got the whole book off to an early dramatic start, since it is the student riot and its aftermath that

almost propel the young hero into his American adventures—often short stories in oral history form with Adamic as listener and recorder. True, the book is certainly not quite as advertised, “The Autobiography of an Immigrant in America,” but it is close enough, a fine job of imaginative recreation of one immigrant’s America.

As his friend, Carey McWilliams, who died only last year, maintained, Louis Adamic was above all a story teller. Furthermore, he said that while one might suspect any of the details in Adamic’s first person narratives, yet in some uncanny way the essence of the truth was always in them. “It is invariably the dramatic incident,” says McWilliams “and not the facts that [Adamic] is after.”¹⁹

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NOTES

1. Louis Adamic, *Laughing in the Jungle* (New York: Harper, 1932).
2. Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (New York: Macmillan, 1971, 1972), pp. 74-75.
3. Adamic, pp. 25-38.
4. Ivan Lah, *Knjiga spominov* (Ljubljana: Tiskovna Zadruga R.Z.Z.G.Z., 1925).
5. Lah, pp. 5-7, 9-10.
6. Adamic, p. 28.
7. Adamic, p. 68.
8. Ivan Lah, *V borbi za Jugoslavijo* (Ljubljana: Vodnikova Družba, 1928), p. 94.
9. Ivan Lah, *V borbi*, pp. 93-95.
10. Louis Adamic, “The Land of Laughs,” *American Mercury* (April, 1929), p. 482.
11. Louis Adamic, *What’s Your Name* (New York and London: Harper, 1942), p. 12.
12. Ivan Lah, *Knjiga spominov*, p. 3.
13. “Yugoslav Studies,” a conference sponsored by the International Studies Institute at Grand Valley State Colleges on October 25-26, 1974, at Allendale, Michigan. Dedijer spoke on “the role of Yugoslavia’s Tito.” His remarks on the author as player were in the nature of asides.
14. Louis Adamic, *The Eagle and the Roots* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1952), p. 330.

15. For example in Louis Adamic, *My America* (New York and London: Harper, 1938), p. xii, "I believe that the drama of things is the truth of things."

16. Ivan Molek, "Adamič odkril Ameriko," *Prosveta* (April 1932), p. 2.

17. Ivan Molek, *Slovene Immigrant History*, trans. Mary Molek (Dover, Delaware: M. Molek, Inc., 1979), p. 224.

18. Ivan Molek, *History*, p. 224.

19. See, for example, Carey McWilliams, *Louis Adamic and Shadow America* (Los Angeles: Arthur Whipple, 1935), p. 53; see also p. 52. McWilliams says that an Adamic article "is not so much an article at all, in the accepted sense, as it is a fine story."