

Rozina Švent, Slovenski begunci v Austriji 1945–1950, Založba ZRC Ljubljana 2007, 378 str.

Dr. Rozina Švent's *Slovenski begunci v Austriji 1945-1950* is an important addition to the growing literature on the Slovene political migration. Its scope is admirably summarised by dr. Joze Rant on its back cover:

The book describes the life and activities of those post-war Slovene refugees from communism, whom the British did not return to Yugoslavia in 1945. The study fills one of the gaps in recent Slovene history. On the basis of numerous primary and secondary, written and oral sources it inventories the part of the Slovene families abroad from May 1945 until the emigration overseas of the majority of them, mostly to Argentina.

Dr. Švent writes of about 6,000 Slovene refugees in all the six largest camps in Austria, which she has examined from four viewpoints: accommodation, health and hygiene, food and management. The monograph produces demographic statistics of the refugees broken down by years. It inventories education and culture, religious life, refugee press and cultural activity (music, theatre, reading evenings, libraries, exhibitions). It concerns itself with the problem of repatriation and migration in new centres of settlement.

The book's publishers can be proud of it: the well-chosen cover picture, its compactness, the really informative table of contents, numerous and relevant illustrations, clear map, generous charts and tables, good name index. Its contents provide evidence of painstaking and systematic research and skill in presenting a mass of information with great clarity.

But, in spite of her years of devoted labours, does dr. Švent really understand the importance and historic significance of her subject? The question may seem impertinent, and to justify it I need to disclose how I was, and am, involved.

Some readers may have read *Ob babilonski reki*, dr. Rebula's fictional treatment of the subject. I was his "English humanitarian worker", worked at the three principal refugee camps dr. Švent describes, Vetrinje, Peggetz-Lienz and Spittal, and was largely instrumental in setting up the seventh camp she treats more summarily, the unique camp which enabled refugee students to study at the University of Graz.. Then over the last 30 years I spent much of my time researching, lecturing and broadcasting on the subject and writing numerous articles and a book. So I qualify under all four categories, as one of the book's sources, both primary and secondary, written and oral.

Dr. Švent rightly devotes 20 pages to the appalling repatriation of the Domobranci by the British Army and their massacre, but only one to the Army's order that the 6,000 civilians should also be sent back, and its subsequent cancellation. This is of course central to her whole book, but she shows no curiosity why the Army changed its mind so speedily on so important an issue. The answer is easily available in *Pricevanja: Graski zbornik (1996)* (listed on page 350 of dr. Švent's "sources and literature – monographs"). This includes four talks by Tolstoy, Ambrozic, a returned Domobranec academic and myself.

My 15 pages present original research into what led to the British Army's remarkable cancellation of the order, and are endorsed by Tolstoy himself.

The great virtue of *Slovenski begunci* is that it gives a uniquely detailed description of the camps in Austria and the cultural level that can be attained when the residents are empowered, to use the current jargon, or given enough autonomy to run things on their own, as happened certainly in the heyday of Peggetz-Lienz, during British Army control of Major Richards and the whole UNRRA regime of the charismatic Group Captain Ryder Young. The same applies to the Graz-Hochsteingasse 37 students' camp under the much-loved Margaret Jaboor, dealt with summarily by dr. Švent but vividly recalled by drs. Metod Milac and Marko Kremzar in their memoirs. These were model camps in their way, with a massive amount to teach the administrators of refugee camps today, and dr. Švent has performed a major public service in documenting them. What a pity that so few can access her descriptions, as English is the lingua franca of the aid world.

The book ends with single-page summaries of the text in Slovene and English. These are helpful, but the penultimate paragraph contains in my view two serious misconceptions. Firstly, when UNRRA took over the camps around December 1945, this did indeed mean full responsibility. The British withdrew all their personnel and UNRRA appointed new camp directors and teams. The British remained only as the governing authority of their Zone of Austria, with DP and PW branch of Military Government in a co-ordinating capacity at the policy level, and the Army's Field Security Service (FSS) intervening when it judged that issues of law and order were at stake. It is therefore a mistake to blame "the British" for UNRRA's shortcomings.

The second misconception is that administrative responsibilities were entrusted to so-called "camp-committees" *due to a lack of* (Army/UNRRA) *personnel*. On the contrary, there were always two schools of thought, the liberals who argued that as much administrative responsibility as possible should be vested in the refugees themselves, and the paternalists. Major Barre, in charge of the Viktring/Vetrinje camp, strongly supported the former school, as I recorded on page 43 of my book *Slovenia 1945* which dr. Švent also includes in her literature list: "Barre ... encouraged self-administration. He saw himself largely in the role of a liaison officer." I added, on page 115, that

The advent of UNRRA promised a fillip to the liberal line ... The British Zone director of UNRRA, Australian Major C.D.Chapman, told staff they were there "in an advisory capacity" and the refugees should run their own groups and elect their own leaders. "These people have faced great disaster and must be given hope, courage and retraining to face normal life again. They must be helped to help themselves as rapidly as possible," he declared. (my emphasis).

The book is so full of valuable information that I feel ungrateful to be finding fault, but it would be disingenuous to pile on the praise without reservation. I come now to page 279, which opens Chapter 8 on "the problem of the repatriation of the refugees". Here dr. Švent baldly defines the 10,000 who retreated across the border to Austria and Italy

as “Quislings or former collaborators of the occupiers and their families”. This was the official Yugoslav government position for 45 years, but are Slovenian historians today comfortable with such a simplistic approach? Would the late dr. Rant, to whose memory the volume is so movingly dedicated, who features as one of its three recenzenti and whose magnum opus *The Slovenian Exodus of 1945* appeared in Buenos Aires also in 2007, have approved of this summary formulation? I must admit dr. Rant was himself capable of simplistic judgements, as when on page 245 of the English version, referring in a footnote to *Slovenia 1945* and myself, “co-authored with Ferrar” he attempts to give an accurate portrayal of the repatriation and the life and work of the refugee camps, but he loses objectivity and impartiality particularly in the final chapters, where he buys into Kucan’s fallacy about the existence of multiple truths, and thus describes the wartime situation and the Revolution according to the communist viewpoint about the Catholic - and not only Catholics! - anti-revolutionists-collaborators. Kucan’s viewpoint might be tenable if he were discussing multiple explanations for historical actions, thus about truthfulness, and not about the truth.

Dr. Švent is exemplary in her quantitative inventory of the six camps, less so in qualitative assessment. Primary written sources were available to her. She lists among her *virii in literature* an article in issue 8 of *Dve domovini*, which includes an eye-witness report to the British authorities on the Viktring and Lienz camps already in August 1945:

At Viktring under exceptionally difficult conditions the refugees ran the camp themselves ... well enough for its inmates to compare it favourably with that at the camps to which they were later sent. ... The Slovenes have a high degree of social consciousness and form a closely-knit community. They have shown a marked leaning towards and aptitude for democratic methods of administration. Their leaders work hard for those in need of their help and oppose preferential treatment for themselves and their friends. The director of the secondary school, who could certainly have secured a room with his family if he had asked for one, lives in the most crowded barrack of the camp with several other families.

Conclusion: The administration of the Slovenes at Viktring and Lienz shows they have enough competent leaders and skilled workers and are a unified enough community to be able to run their camp by themselves. ... the most satisfactory course would seem to be to attach one or more liaison officers in an advisory rather than a directory capacity. This would contribute greatly to the preservation of that individual and communal self-respect which is usually the first casualty in the refugee camp.

I can vouch for the report’s accuracy and reliability. I wrote it. The secondary school referred to, the begunska gimnazija, produced two of the most prominent Slovenes on the world stage today, Cardinals Ambrožič and Rode, and also a past President of SAZU. The four grandchildren of the school’s director all attained distinction in their professions, the youngest becoming Prime Minister and later Finance Minister of Slovenia. Information relevant to a qualitative appraisal of the camps, but not mentioned by dr. Švent.

These are details. What is important is that this fascinating, part tragic and part heroic, episode in Slovene history was taboo for many, many years. Dr. Švent and the Institute for Slovenian Emigration Studies deserve all credit and praise for putting this to right, at long last, so that future Slovene generations can be more properly informed. This book is a step in the right direction.

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