

# PRESERVATION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AMONG SLOVENIAN EMIGRANTS IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

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## INTRODUCTION

National identity is certainly one of the most significant aspects of personal identity and it reaches even greater expression in the emigrant context. This is first felt by the immigrant personally, and then by his/her descendants who almost of necessity find themselves caught in the vice-grip of dual socialization.

The "new" culture is for them not new but rather the only one they know, at least the only true one. No matter how intensively Slovenian-ness is transmitted to the descendants, it cannot overcome physical distance, the lack of contact, the "imaginari-ness" or even "fairytaleness" of the specific culture that is called Slovenia; they lack the experience of territorial belonging, and the presence of the majority, "graspable" culture is too strong. In what various forms, then, is Slovenian ethnic identity possible among those who have grown up in a different environment? What kinds of ties still exist between them and the primary homeland (of their parents), and which are in this specific context the effects of the so-called era of globalization? Are they positive or negative? And finally, how do Slovenian institutions – governmental and non-governmental – deal with the changes, including the dramatic socio-political changes after the fall of Yugoslavia?

This paper endeavors to give answers to these questions, to explain or place under question the possible model of a particular country's attitude towards its Diaspora. But first it is necessary to pass through a short historical overview of Slovenian migration processes.

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF SLOVENIAN EMIGRATION

Slovenian ethnic territory has suffered a high level of emigration during the last two centuries. Slovenians emigrated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as economic emigrants, at first mostly to the USA, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also to Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, Belgium and some other developed European countries. In Argentina and Brazil, they continued with farming, in the USA their dreams finished in the coal mines and huge

heavy industry factories. A very rare destiny was that of those women who migrated to Egypt, mostly to Alexandria, where they served to rich European, Jewish and also Arab families, including breast-feeding of their children. In the mid-1920's a large number of Slovenians (about 30,000) escaped – mostly to Argentina – from the growing fascist pressure and from hunger. After World War Two, there was an important flow of political refugees – former anti-partisan military troops with their families. In different periods from the 1960's to 1980's there was a large number of economic emigrants, trying to find better jobs in the developed industrial countries of Western Europe (Germany, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, France, Sweden). It is estimated that close to 500,000 Slovenians have emigrated from the Slovenian ethnic territory in the recent past, and this number is the "fifth quarter" of today's 2 million Slovenians living in Slovenia. Unfortunately, it is impossible to find a more exact number, because Slovenians migrated as citizens of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy and Yugoslavia, therefore most of the evidence is scattered around in different archives and in most cases the records in immigrant countries show no mark of the ethnic origin of new-comers.

Most of the Slovenian immigrants soon after their arrival in a new society started to organize themselves on an ethnic basis. They started to gather in Slovenian clubs and pubs, they also received a great deal of support from the Slovenian Catholic Church. Sunday and Saturday meetings, cultural events, schools, drama-plays, orchestras and choirs, drinking and singing with fellow country-men – all this helped to preserve their ethnic identity, since in those clubs and churches they felt home-like, this was a substitute for their real homeland.

## ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ASSIMILATION

But already for their sons and daughters these feelings were different. They were born in the USA, Argentina or wherever and all they could feel was the deep pain of homesickness of their parents, and perhaps a sense of belonging to this specific culture, different to the one they lived in. But they could not feel the "territorial" belonging to a certain village somewhere far away in Slovenia, although – through mostly very strong secondary socialization at home including the knowledge of the mother tongue – they could almost feel the smell of it. Almost.

Over the years, the second and third generation started to intermarry with non-Slovenians, the sense of responsibility for attending social events in clubs started to disappear and remained mostly limited to occasional participation in some ethnic or ethno-religious festivals. From being "Slovenians, born in the immigrant country", they more and more converted to becoming "Americans, Argentineans etc., of Slovenian origin". The Slovenian language became very rare among these generations.

For instance, members of the second generation of pre-war immigrants are today approximately seventy years old. Already with the first generation assimilation strongly affected Slovenian identity and with it the use of the Slovenian language, therefore it

would be unjust to expect miracles from youngsters. As estimated, their primary identity is (with rare exceptions) Argentinean, Australian, Canadian etc., although a strong identification with "Slovenian-ness" is noticeable with active members of Slovenian societies regardless of their (non-) knowledge of the Slovenian language.

Well, we still have to describe an exception, the post-war political refugees, better known as the "*Slovenian political emigrants*" (*SPE*) in Argentina. They constitute a special group in popular and scholarly accounts on emigration. From 1947 to 1950, with another smaller group in 1954, around 6,000 Slovenians came to Argentina. Within a few days, in May 1945, under the threat of violence, they left their homeland all together. Together with their families they fled to Austria and Italy. The soldiers of anticommunist military formations surrendered to British troops, but about 11,000 of them were returned by trains from the Austrian refugee camp Vetrinje to Yugoslavia, and many of them were secretly executed and thrown into caves in Slovenian forests. But the majority remained in Austrian and Italian refugee camps where they organized their proper cultural, religious, political life, and education (Žigon, 1999).

Members of this emigration wave arrived in Argentina as a tightly-knit group and settled as such mainly in Buenos Aires. They were welcome, since the country needed to supplement its trained work force. The Slovenian Central-European work ethic, ingenuity and self-reliance enabled these people to establish themselves quickly. Their compact settlement and the prominence of intellectuals – around seventy priests and 150 other intellectuals (within a group of 6,000!) – meant that they soon began organizing themselves on a relatively high intellectual level. At first they attended religious gatherings and soon began a program of primary education. Nine centers were built in various parts of Buenos Aires and in Bariloche and Mendoza (Jevnikar, 1996). Special attention was devoted to education. They founded Saturday primary schools and a secondary school. The numbers varied through the years, but surprisingly, in recent years they are growing again, so in 2002, about 550 children attended Saturday instruction. There are close to 100 teachers, almost all of whom were born in Argentina. In the same year, 161 children were enrolled in secondary school which employs 20 voluntary teachers. It is also worth noting the Slovenian religious life, the periodical press (the weekly *Svobodna Slovenija*), the strong cultural life (choral singing, drama), and the high-quality literary institution.

In this community, the visitor can still hear the third or fourth generation understanding and even speaking Slovenian, although they are also beginning to feel the assimilation and Slovenian is no longer their primary, mother tongue. The Slovenian political emigration, as an almost parallel-state strongly organized community, had at its disposal the energetic source for its own existence. In the light of common historical recollection, the "martyrdom" – that is, remembrance of the relatives and friends killed after (and during) the war – provided that energy (Žigon, 2001).

But this community is a unique phenomenon. The most significant part of Slovenian migrants is exposed to the same standard roles of acculturation and assimilation as most of the emigrant communities in the world.

## DOUBLENESS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY IN AN IMMIGRANT

The preservation of the ethnic identity of one's forefathers is influenced by the possibility of motivation for self-preservation. This on the other hand is the consequence of the (various) causes of emigration, distance from the mother country, the difference of the immigrant culture and the positive attitude towards socio-political conditions in the motherland. Ethnic identity is preserved in the family, in emigrants' societies and their institutions and in ethnic religious institutions. It is preserved by maintaining traditional customs, typical food, music and dance, cultivating the political tradition, preserving and cultivating the mother tongue of the parents, typical symbols, historical memory, via cultural activity, and so on, but it still seems that keeping live contact with the country of origin is of most importance, especially for the younger generations.

Following this model, after years of research into (Slovenian) immigrant's ethnic identity I attempted to design a moving qualitative scale of the level of the feeling of ethnic identity among the descendants of Slovenian emigrants, which could be used also by the first generation of Slovenians abroad (Žigon, 1998).

The levels rise in intensity, although typically they interweave with each other and simply represent the most typical forms of expression of ethnic identity, without any moral evaluation on the part of the researcher, and with the assumption that each level represents the maximum an individual is capable of and wants in his or her own social context.

1. Identification identity (minimal knowledge about ethnic origin);
2. Openness (to information, activities connected with the original culture);
3. Folkloric and symbolic identity (occasional participation in events);
4. Club identity (identification with immigrants' clubs);
5. Desire to obtain (Slovenian) citizenship and learn Slovenian;
6. Mobilization identity (active work in the societies);
7. Visits, regular contacts with Slovenia;
8. Speaking and cultivating the mother tongue;
9. Deciding to move to Slovenia.

I would further speculate that for the descendants of Slovenian immigrants it is no longer a case of "Slovenia the mother, Argentina the bride," as is often heard, but "Argentina the mother, Slovenia the grandmother". Slovenia represented for a very long period an almost imaginary world, associated with fairy tales, with the intangible, the distant in time and space, although it is connected with the beautiful, with roots.

In addition to these thoughts, we have to consider that the influence of the majority culture is significantly stronger in the case of mixed marriages; in every case the majority culture has the advantage since it is "tangible", the individual is living and working in it every day, while the primary culture of the parents is for the growing person imaginary, half real, and does not belong to the real world of everyday existence. Without any contacts with the mother-homeland, the ties with it in fact remain on the level of the imagination.

And we have to add another factor: adaptation and further acculturation with assimilation as a final consequence can be much more successful in the case of relatively similar cultural patterns. For example, Slovenians in Austria, France, Germany and Italy had almost no cultural gaps to overcome, the only obstacle which in fact separated them from the dominant culture was for some time the language. Therefore they adapted very fast and because of the closeness of Slovenia they did not really pay much attention to the "Slovenian" education of their children. Suddenly they noticed that their children were not Slovenians, although they intended to return to their motherland after some years. On the other hand, Slovenians in South Africa or Egypt felt a very strong difference from their native culture, so they maybe married white South Africans or Europeans living in Egypt. The same held true for their cultural identity – it was so different that it simply could not be adapted, and there was another circumstance: they lived in a "white ghetto" all the time – a parallel European culture established on the basis of colonial or Apartheid policy.

Anyway, the lack of constant and possibly physical contacts with Slovenia almost led to complete alienation from its culture. But for different reasons, including the effects of globalization, all this started to change in the 1980's and has completely changed in the last 12 years.

## HISTORICAL CHANGES FOR SLOVENIA AND ITS DIASPORA

As mentioned, a strong identification with Slovenian identity is noticeable with the second and even the third generation of active members of Slovenian societies – regardless of their (non-) knowledge of the Slovenian language. A certain level of identification, as described in the theoretical model of a moving scale of identification "categories", has remained among the majority of descendants of Slovenian immigrants, although mostly this level is very low.

The awareness of ethnic roots by Slovenians worldwide started to rise in the late 1980's and 1990's. There are several reasons:

1. The level of the preservation of ethnic roots among Slovenians in emigration has depended on different *multicultural policies* in individual countries.<sup>1</sup> So, when multicultural countries such as USA and Australia changed their attitude towards immigrants and their societies, things changed. If belonging to a certain ethnic group was not of any advantage in the past, now it has become something normal, being not only "American", but "Afro-, Latino-, xx- American" seems to be becoming one of the most important factors of one's personal identity within a multicultural nation.

<sup>1</sup> The material consequences of changes in the multicultural policy of some countries can be also negative. Slovenians in Sweden (they have been living in this country for at least 20 years) are getting less financial support for their activities, because they are becoming smaller and smaller compared to the growing number of new-coming immigrants in recent years.

2. Among different generations and groups of Slovenian immigrants around the world such a perception increased with the attainment of the *independence of Slovenia*, as only then did the complicated situation in the Balkans become clarified – they could finally understand the difference between Yugoslavia as an artificial multi-cultural and multinational state and Slovenia in or out of it, and only now could they explain their ethnic origin to their school-friends and neighbors ...
3. Globalization, as a process of advanced technology, has brought many benefits to the relations between Slovenia and its countrymen in the World. The other reason is the increasing knowledge of English, as well as German, Italian and now Spanish.

## EFFECTS OF SLOVENIA'S INDEPENDENCE<sup>2</sup>

After the independence and international recognition of the Republic of Slovenia, the Slovenian identity in the Diaspora or its identification with Slovenia as a country and a national state was significantly raised. Everything started already in the decisive days of the Slovenian battle for independence in 1991, when all generations, all immigrant clubs and associations of all political colors joined in manifestations, demonstrations and various other actions (sending thousands of letters of support to the White house, UN, etc.) in order to help the motherland to achieve its own, internationally recognized national state. The changes at that time and after it were "tectonic".

The number of those, according to Census in the USA, who stated "Slovenian" as their ethnic origin rose from 124,000 in the year 1990 to 175,000 in the year 2000; the same process is noticed in Canada with an estimated 40,000 Slovenians. This means that the second, third and even fourth generations of Slovenian immigrants clarified their ethnic self-identification; they started to be aware and – even more important – proud of their origin. Furthermore, those who had felt themselves to be Slovenian even before, reconfirmed and renewed their "ethnic" energy; they were comforted for their permanent struggle for "Slovenian-ness".

Numerous politically separated clubs gathered for this occasion and organized united demonstrations of all Slovenians regardless of their political opinion, and many of these ties remained even when the situation calmed down in 1992. A significant number of clubs which had been ignored, and for the last 45 years had not been able to have any contacts with Slovenia because of their political background, now got the chance to visit their homeland and to start up regular cultural, political, even economic contacts with it.

New Slovenian clubs were established in former Yugoslav republics, i.e. Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Macedonia: Slovenians had worked in these

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<sup>2</sup> Žigon, 2002.

countries as a part of one and the same state, and the creation of the new independent Slovenian state with state borders also towards the rest of former Yugoslavia suddenly made them immigrants. Some organized in clubs immediately, some only in the recent years, some are still trying to organize.

In the last two years some other new associations of Slovenians have also been established – in RSA, Kenya and most recently in Shanghai.

With the change of regime, the number of Slovenians from abroad, willing to visit Slovenia increased rapidly, and at the same time, the standard of living in Slovenia rose so much that also travelling from this country to visit relatives in America, Australia etc. became much more accessible to everyone. This means that permanent physical contact between the homeland and the Diaspora was established. This fact is of great importance, since from that moment Slovenia is no longer an “imaginary dreamland”, but a real (although small) green piece of land in the middle of Europe and it can be touched, felt, experienced.

This period can also be marked as the era of epochal changes in the relation between official Slovenians and Slovenians outside of its borders. After a “Yugoslav” period of selected and marginalized support to Slovenian emigrants, the situation changed in the last 12 years. The policy of the Republic of Slovenia towards Slovenians abroad changed from selected and non-organized help to more organized and rational (although not always optimal) work in this field.

## **POLICY TOWARDS THE DIASPORA IN THE PERIOD OF SLOVENIAN INDEPENDENCE**

The 5<sup>th</sup> article of the Slovenian Constitution deals with the concern of the motherland for Slovenians living outside of its political-geographic borders. Not only on the basis of this paragraph, but also in the light of the fact that almost one fifth of Slovenians live outside of the Republic of Slovenia, there are numerous institutions and associations which are trying to preserve Slovenian ethnic and cultural identity worldwide.

In 1990 Slovenia even established a ministry for Slovenians living abroad. Its concern was to make and keep contacts with the Diaspora and Slovenian minorities in Austria, Italy and Hungary. This ministry played an efficient role in the year 1991, during the times of the struggle for independence and international recognition. Later it was changed into an Office for Slovenians abroad, incorporated into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This governmental body plays the role of coordinator between different ministries and other government institutions, and at the same time it provides financial support to Slovenian minorities and Slovenian associations in other countries. A total of about 7.5 million USD is distributed for these purposes, mostly for Slovenian minorities in the neighboring countries – their schools, cultural clubs and their activities; less than 8 % of this is allocated for all kinds of support to the Diaspora. Most attention is paid to supporting their archives (to save very precious documents, photos and other

material artifacts of Slovenian presence in the world), cultural activities and especially the media. In cooperation with some civil society organizations in Slovenia, numerous cultural tours to the Diaspora and from the Diaspora to Slovenia are organized and partially sponsored.

In coordination with other ministries, Slovenians from abroad can obtain scholarships for their studies in Slovenia – whether of the Slovenian language or other subjects at Slovenian Universities. Seminars for immigrant teachers of the Slovenian language and culture are organized every year, as well as seminars for immigrant journalists and cultural animators – managers in Slovenian clubs. The office also supports projects of some domestic institutions, for example the Institute for Slovenian Emigration Studies, Slovenian Emigrant Society, Slovenian World Congress, etc.

The parliamentary commission for Slovenians abroad is the one that in recent years has produced two parliamentary resolutions about the liabilities of the Slovenian State relating to Slovenians in neighboring countries and elsewhere in the world. Right now representatives of this commission, the aforementioned Office and some other ministries are coordinating the creation of a special law on this matter.

## **DIASPORA, HOMELAND AND GLOBALIZATION**

Even if we can speculate about the threat of globalization to the cultural identity of the Slovenian nation in Slovenia – which is very small and in this sense very fragile – globalization itself is not a threat to the ethnic identity of Slovenians abroad; on the contrary, it brings the Diaspora closer to its country of origin, and this is becoming increasingly evident in recent years. Slovenian associations, societies and individuals abroad are using the Internet as the most convenient means of overcoming two major factors of their separation and alienation from the primary homeland: the distance and – for younger generations – the language.

We speak about a new two-way process, which is also changing ways of thinking in Slovenia itself. Namely, almost every Slovenian immigrant society has created its own Internet home page. Some of them are connected with web links, which lead even to an exchange of different information about Slovenia as a tourist destination, about potential business partners, etc. Slovenians in Slovenia who do not really pay much attention to its Diaspora, but who do use the Internet very frequently, can be informed about the Diaspora much better than at any other time in the history. They can reach their relatives and contact them instantly and frequently all the time – we can hardly even compare this way of communication with the “pre-historical” writing of post-letters which took months to reach the address.

Communication via the Internet is familiar mostly to the younger generations; this way they find Slovenia much more attractive and real than through the image of a rural and very traditionalistic Alpine country as shown at mostly old-fashioned cultural events with polka music and typical food. They can communicate with their coevals in



Slovenia as frequently as with their school-friends next door, and they can surf through virtual Slovenia at every moment.

Globalization is causing another change: almost every young Slovenian is capable of communicating in English, most of them can also handle another foreign language, mostly German or Italian, and increasingly Spanish. The language barrier is therefore falling; not speaking Slovenian is no longer a shame or a communication obstacle for a second or third generation Slovenian in the Diaspora, as they can often communicate with Slovenia in their primary (non-Slovenian) language.

And more: in a few months, a program for a long-distance learning of Slovenian language – via the Internet – will be systemized and accessible to all users of the Internet in the world. The Internet of course cannot replace a teacher as a living person, but it can help to keep people in contact, which is, as we have already mentioned, of greatest importance in order to preserve a certain level of primary ethnic identity.

Although globalization has brought a scaring unification of values and ways of thinking – which can be considered as a negative effect – it does also mean that young Slovenians can discuss the same problems, same movies and music stars, same events (including war ...). This makes them feel as if they belong to the same “virtual” state of mind – this brings them together and at the same time makes them more open to a new model of the modern, cosmopolitan Slovenia.

Although this process is just in its beginning phase, we can conclude that one of the strongest emigrant cultural patterns is changing, and we can probably estimate the same for most of other national Diasporas.

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## POVZETEK

### OHRANJANJE ETNIČNE IDENTITETE MED SLOVENSKIMI IZSELJENCI V DOBI GLOBALIZACIJE

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*Slovensko etnično ozemlje je v zadnjih dveh stoletjih utrpelo visoko stopnjo izseljevanja. Kot ekonomski emigranti so se Slovenci izseljevali zlasti v ZDA, v prvi polovici 19. stoletja tudi v Argentino, Brazilijo, Egipt, Belgijo in nekatere druge razvite evropske države. Sredi dvajsetih let se je veliko število Slovencev iz regije, ki je bila tedaj pod italijansko oblastjo, umaknilo pred naraščajočim fašističnim pritiskom, večinoma v Argentino. Po drugi svetovni vojni je prišlo do pomembnega vala političnih beguncev, ki so se zaradi prevlade komunizma v domovini izselili zlasti v Argentino, ZDA, Kanado in Avstralijo. V različnih obdobjih od šestdesetih do osemdesetih let pa je precejšnje število značilnih ekonomskih izseljencev odšlo v Nemčijo, Švedsko, Švico, Francijo, Belgijo in še nekatere druge dežele. Ocenjujejo, da se je v bližnji preteklosti izselilo s slovenskega etničnega ozemlja skoraj 500.000 Slovencev, kar predstavlja »peto četrtino« današnjih dveh milijonov Slovencev, živečih v Sloveniji.*

*V prizadevanju, da bi ohranili svojo izvorno etnično identiteto, so slovenski izseljenci ustanovili na stotine etničnih društev in združenj. Sčasoma so pripadniki prvih izseljenških generacij preminili, medtem ko se druga, tretja in že četrta generacija trudijo, da bi še naprej gojili čim tesnejše vezi s svojimi narodnimi koreninami in stike z domovino svojih prednikov.*

*Raven ohranjenosti njihovih etničnih korenin je bila odvisna od različnih multikulturnih politik v posameznih deželah priseljevanja, pa tudi od odnosa slovenske (jugoslovanske) politične ureditve do njih. Po razglasitvi slovenske neodvisnosti in mednarodnem priznanju Republike Slovenije se je slovenska identiteta v diaspori bistveno okrepila. Mnogi od tistih, ki so se prej težko istovetili z Jugoslavijo (kot centralistično mnogoetnično državo), so se v tem času začeli istovetiti s Slovenijo. Nenadoma se je pojavila cela vrsta novih izseljenških društev, število izseljenških obiskov v Sloveniji je poskočilo ipd. Na drugi strani pa je tudi Republika Slovenija uvedla novo politiko do izseljencev. Za Slovence po svetu je bilo ustanovljeno posebno ministrstvo, ki se je pozneje preoblikovalo v urad, s tem pa so se začeli izvajati tudi novi sistematični modeli financiranja in drugih oblik podpore Slovincem v diaspori.*

*Globalizacija sama po sebi ne ogroža narodne identitete Slovencev po svetu. Kot proces moderne tehnologije je olajšala stike in s tem izboljšala odnos med Slovenijo in rojaki v izseljenstvu, kar postaja vse bolj očitno v zadnjih letih. Slovenske izseljenške organizacije, društva in posamezniki uporabljajo medmrežje kot najprikladnejše sredstvo za premagovanje dveh bistvenih dejavnikov, ki sta jih do nedavnega ločevala od matične domovine: razdalje in – pri mlajših generacijah – jezika. Kaže, da lahko hitrost in globalni doseg sodobne komunikacije dovolj uspešno nadomestita fizični stik. Jezikovna asimilacija in posledična jezikovna pregrada med izseljenci in njihovimi sorodniki v Sloveniji postajata vse manj problematični, razen tega pa doba globalizacije prinaša podobne vrednote in komunikacijske kode vsem mladostnikom po svetu.*

*Zvone Žigon je doktor politologije, zaposlen kot svetovalec vlade na Uradu za Slovence v zamejstvu in po svetu pri Ministrstvu za zunanje zadeve Republike Slovenije. Kot znanstveni sodelavec je v dopolnilnem delovnem razmerju na Inštitutu za slovensko izseljenstvo ZRC SAZU v Ljubljani.*