

EULOGY OF A MAN OF TWO HOMELANDS

R a d o L. L e n č e k

***John P. Nielsen, 77,
Professor of Metallurgy***

John Phillip Nielsen, an emeritus professor of metallurgy at the Polytechnic Institute of New York and co-founder of the International Precious Metals Institute, died Saturday at the Slovene Home for the Aged in Cleveland, Ohio. He was 77 years old and had moved to Cleveland from Manhattan two weeks ago after suffering a stroke.

Mr. Nielsen, a native of Cleveland, was a precious metals researcher who helped to develop several alloys for dental work. In 1947, he left Phillips Laboratory to become professor and chairman of the Department of Metallurgy and Materials Sciences at New York University. In 1973, the engineering faculty of N.Y.U. merged with that of Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute to form the Polytechnic Institute of New York. In 1975, Mr. Nielsen was named adjunct professor of Dental Materials Science and in 1976, he became professor emeritus.

A widower, he has no immediate survivors.

Obituary: **The New York Times**, Tuesday, August 15, 1989

In memoriam of John Phillip Nielsen on the occasion of his memorial service, Sunday, September 24, 1989, St. Cyril Church, New York, N.Y.

It is a pleasure for me to have been invited to pay tribute here to the man who stood among us as an example of an American Slovene - an American, John Phillip Nielsen, a scientist and a citizen of the world; a native born Slovene, John Sešek Junior, as we would style his name today, in his inmost mind a genuine vernacular man as we knew him in our community here. In this Memorial I wish to say a few words about John Phillip Nielsen - the American, his interests in, his preoccupation with, and his activities in the matters of his ethnic roots, family genealogy, his philanthropy, his vocation in Slovene affairs in general.

I believe, it is not my assignment here to provide a chronological account of John's long and distinguished career as a scientist, professor and an academic administrator, of his contributions to dental materials technology, his research publications, his awards and recognitions. The facts are all amply recorded in the appropriate reference books. I will simply summarize them by saying that he received his master's degree in Engineering in 1942 at Yale and defended his thesis at Yale in 1947; that he was a professor at both - New York University and the Polytechnic Institute of New York, Chairman of the Department of Metalurgy and Materials Sciences at the New York University, Professor of the Department of Dental Materials Science at NYU Dental Center, the founder and organizer of the International Precious Metals Institute in New York, the leading professional organization in the precious metal field in the world. What I should like to register here, however, is the story of his Slovenianism - not recorded in **Who's Who in America Today**.

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John Nielsen was born as Janez Sešek in Cleveland, in his own words *»very much Slovenian, no different from being born in Spodnji Kašelj«*, a village in Slovenia where his parents came from. Up to six years of age, he probably never met anyone that was not Slovene. His first education was in St. Vitus School in Cleveland, an essentially Slovene elementary school with about 600-800 Slovene pupils in those years, as one of its 117 equally Slovene boys and girls in that year, which was 1917. He graduated in 1926 and continued in Cleveland High, a public high school, which was a first

watershed of John's Slovenialism. It was during his high school years that he discovered the Cleveland Public Library. I quote his own words: *»I was soon familiar with Henry James, Walt Whitman, Joseph Conrad, Shakespeare... but I had difficulty to research Slovene topics in Public Library... It is then that I began question my provincialism on being a Mid-Westerner... I began to envy peoples with names like Bill Wilson and Jack Cole... I Compared my mother unfavorably with the mothers of Irish and »English« fellow students, mothers who spoke English as well as the teachers, indeed, to my puzzlement, even better sometimes. I began to be ashamed of the homemade shirts and sweaters I wore to high school...«*

We are not amazed at this sudden selfconsciousness, embarrassment, even the feeling of inferiority and humiliation of a young man about being a nobody, part of an unknown, unheard-off tribe, with an unusual, awkward name - when his horizon opened up for the first time. The great Slovene writer, Ivan Cankar, went through the same agonies. The iconic images of his short stories: *Mater je zatajil* (He disowned his own mother), *Skodelica kave* (A cup of coffee), are tuned to the same theme and speak the same language.

After High School, John Sešek Jr. entered college, still at home in Cleveland, as he ponders those years in one of his reminiscences - *»as a stranger with my own family and friends«*. *»No one understood me if I quoted Shakespeare, or talked about 'moment of inertia' or the mechanics of rotating bodies... When I hinted that I wanted to be a chemist, there was skepticism... What was wrong in getting a good job in a factory? Or better yet, how about opening up a gas station or a small business in the neighborhood selling wallpaper and paints?«* And not wanting to be unfair to his own parents, John gently softens his recollection here: *»They wanted the best for me; it is that they did not want me to be hurt in trying to cross into a world where I did not belong...«* When John graduated college, he graduated in Chemistry.

The known experience on his first professional job in a Chemical Company in Cleveland precipitated a string of drastic choices in John's life. In his own words, again, *»I accepted the verdict that I could not cross the line to the Anglo-Saxon world. Now, I knew my place... and that I have to do*

*something about it... I quit in a huff and decided to get a master degree and a Ph.d. ... I decided to change my name and came East to Connecticut.** It was then that twenty-five years old John Phillip Nielsen settled in New Haven, Connecticut, and entered Yale. Except for the yearly visit to his home, he heard no Slovene words for 20 to 35 years, he ultimately settled here in Manhattan and lived exclusively for science.

When came his official retirement in 1976, with more free time, the nostalgic longing for bygone time and places entered his life and led him to return to his Slovenianism. He began to look back on his growing up in a Slovene ambience. He developed a deep curiosity about his Slovene coordinates. In 1953 he for the first time visited the land of his parents, then year after year, almost annually. Through language he now identifies himself with Slovenes in their homeland, with their space and their past, moreover, as he put it, with their movement of history. *»I now sense that I am part of this movement«*, he wrote in 1988 - which marks a full circle of his Slovenianism, ending as it began...

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In what time remains, and I sense that it should be brief, I shall touch upon two John's achievements and contributions in the field of the matters of Slovene affairs, an intellectual-visionary one from which he derived a profound satisfaction after his coming home to Slovenianism once again, and a charitable-philanthropic one that constitutes his chief legacy in both his homelands, here and in Slovenia.

It is perhaps no accident that the appearance of first John's introspective sketches and essays coincides with his joining to rank and file of regular active members of the Society for Slovene Studies in 1977. His essays, **Letter from New York** (1977), **In Search of Ethnic Identity** (1981), **The Americanization of Janez** (1988), his unpublished paper *The Slovene Immigrant and His Stay-at-Home Counterpart*, presented in a session of the AAASS in 1982 in Washington, D.C., as well as his **Rojškova Hiša Newsletter** (1981-1989) - mark this intellectual return to Slovenianism. In the Epilogue to his biography of his father, **The Americanization of Janez**, John speaks of this personal conversion: *»I began to look back foundly on growing up in a Slovene ambience... I was raised as a Slovenian, by*

*Slovenian parents... My curiosity led me learn about Slovene history, and I planned to visit the homeland of my parents. And so I came in 1953 the first time, and perhaps thirty times since then, almost annually... I began to sense the movement of a whole people developing the unique culture of Slovenianism. A movement that began some 1200 years ago as a group of Slavs from the Carpathians made their way toward the Danube, and then fanned southward to the valleys and plains east and south of the Julian Alps. A people that spoke a Slavic language, which crystallized into what is now known as Slovene ... I now sense that I am part of this movement.**

During 1985-88, John served as member of the Society's Executive Council, during 1986-87 he took upon himself to sponsor a SSS membership drive which resulted in a substantial increase in members. He actively participated in all conferences of the Society, its business meetings planning for the Society's future. As we once, not long ago, flew together to Bloomington, Indiana, for the Society's annual meeting in 1988, we talked about the work in Society for Slovene Studies and its mission in American Slavic studies today. *»I see it now«,* he confided to me then, *»I see it now and cannot but repeat about the Society the same as I have said once before about another organization dear to me, the professional precious metal institute (IPMI): 'I don't know exactly what the place for us in American universities is yet, but there is a need for us in the English speaking world. I think we are doing an important job.'«*

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It was of course part of his character, education and understanding of American humanitarian tradition which moved and prompted John's charitable-philantropical projects and initiatives. This is the only way how we can understand the establishment, the meaning and the substance of two trusts he financially initiated in 1984 and are active since 1985: **The Rojšek Trust** which supports the descendants of the Rojšek Homestead in Slovenia or elsewhere in Europe, the professionals in physical metallurgy in Slovenia, and worthy causes in promoting Slovene culture in Slovenia; and **The Nielsen Trust** to support the descendants of the Rojšek Homestead in the United States and Canada, and worthy causes in the promotion of Slovene-American culture.

To indicate the spirit behind, and the intention of these two trusts, John formulated a rule of conduct he decided to be included in the letter sent to recipients of a grant from these two trusts. This maxime embodies, as it were, his understanding of the meaning and substance of, as well as his personal expectations from his philanthropical project. *»To be the recipient of a granteeship from the Rojšek Trust is to be considered a singular honor and you must do everything you can to uphold its standards. My objective in setting up this Trust is so that descendants of the Rojšek Homestead enter into professions and perform well in their careers, always a credit to the Rojšek clan. In the long run the members of this clan should play their important role in world affairs.«*

It is in this maxime that we are inclined to read John's faith and confidence in *»Rojšek Clan«*, as well as in other crusaders in the Slovene movement of history here and in Slovenia in which John believed - to be instrumental in the implementation of his spiritual legacy. His *News from Nielsen Grantees* in the last issue of the **Rojškova Hiša Newsletter**, dated Winter 1988/89, speaks this language. Just two-three examples:

»One talented member of the Rojškova hiša has been granted support to study at the American University in Washington, D.C.; another grantee of the Nielsen Trust just submitted his doctoral thesis at MIT.« Or: *»A prominent Slovene lady in Ljubljana received a Rojšek Trust grant to sponsor attendance on international conferences on the role of women in society; a prominent scholar in Ljubljana, a Nielsen Trust grant for publishing his English monograph on Jakob Gallus Carniolanus, a Sixteenth Century Slovene composer, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of his birth in 1991.«* Or: *»An annual grant, started this year, for helping a newly formed **St. Vitus Alumni Association** in Cleveland; a grant to **Ameriška Domovina** for the continuation of its Cultural Page; an annual grant to the **Slovenian Singing Group Zarja**; a grant to the **Society for Slovene Studies** for publication of a volume of its scholarly journal **Slovene Studies**.«*

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The evolution of white ethnics in East European immigrational communities in America is known and well

documented. Until recently, the immigrants of the first generation, transplanted, as it were, physically and emotionally insecure in the new country, could function and perform only in their natural linguistic communities. Their sons and daughters, this is the second generation, found themselves in a still more precarious situation: American by birth, with a stigma of immigrants, insecurity, an inferiority complex, intensive introspection, the rejection of their parents, linguistic and cultural heritage, running away from their ethnic communities. Not until the third generation after migration, and even this only in optimal conditions, there appear the first signs of balance, self-confidence and self-assurance. It has been shown that it is only the grand-sons or even only great-grand-sons of the third-fourth generation who began »longing for the roots« and were able to show a sincere interest, without embarrassment, - for language, past and culture of their grand parents.

In John Phillip Nielsen - in one single life span - united, condensed, as it were, the experiences of three-four generations: transplantation, agony of inferiority complex, anguish of social stigma, adolescent rejection of parents' heritage, running away, struggle for recognition, recognition, life-success, and at the end, at the evening of one's day, longing for the roots and opening up for a final return home.

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It is painful to acknowledge that John IS no longer there, but heartening to realize that numerous scholars and students - some of whom will probably never have heard his name - will have an opportunity still for a long time to be beneficiaries of his tireless work on behalf of the science and his Slovenianism.

Thank you.

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