

FROM REFUGEES TO IMMIGRANTS: THE CHALLENGES OF SLOVENIAN RESETTLEMENT TO ARGENTINA AFTER WORLD WAR II

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ABSTRACT

From Refugees to Immigrants: The Challenges of Slovenian Resettlement to Argentina After World War II

The author examines a historical case of forced migration that is well documented in national migration research but still lacks specific insight into the conditions of entrance for post-World War II Slovenian refugees and their settlement in Argentina. The author explores the refugee path of Bara Remec and her family, from exile in May 1945 to their settlement in Argentina in 1948. The subjective experience is juxtaposed to the official Argentinean immigration policy of that time, especially conditions of arrival and settlement, with a focus on political, ideological, and religious factors, as well as Argentina's then-central political decision-maker, Juan D. Peron.

KEYWORDS: refugees, immigration policy, Argentina, refugee camps, Slovenian diaspora

IZVLEČEK

Od beguncev do priseljencev: izzivi preseljevanja Slovencev v Argentino v času po drugi svetovni vojni

Avtorica obravnava zgodovinski primer prisilnih migracij, ki je sicer dobro dokumentiran v nacionalnih migracijskih študijah, a še vedno nimamo natančnejšega vpogleda v pogoje vstopa za slovenske povojne begunce in kasnejše priseljence v Argentini. V članku so v ospredju položaj in izkušnje posameznika z orisom begunske poti Bare Remec od njenega bega maja 1945 do naselitve v Argentini leta 1948. Subjektivna izkušnja je postavljena nasproti uradni argentinski priseljenski politiki tistega časa, zlasti z vidika pogojev prihoda in naselitve. V ospredju analize so politični, ideološki in verski dejavniki, pa tudi osrednji politični odločevalec tistega časa v Argentini, Juan D. Peron.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: begunci, imigracijska politika, Argentina, begunska taborišča, slovenska diaspora

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of my research career, I have been interested in studying what is referred to in the national compendium of literature as SPE (Slovenska politična emigracija, or Slovenian political emigration). My first contact with the subject was through the literature written mainly by Slovenian scholars dealing with the political, historical, spatial, cultural, and social contexts of Slovenian emigration to Argentina (Genorio, 1991; Mislej, 1999; Mlekuž, 1999; Žigon, 2001; Repič, 2006). The field research I conducted in Argentina over almost seven months, divided between 2003, 2005, 2006, and finally, 2009, revealed the full spectrum of complexity. It allowed me to construct several research themes and apply mainly qualitative methodological approaches to them (Toplak, 2008). After two decades of researching various theories, backgrounds, and contexts of migration and exile, I now return to this particular aspect of Slovenian migration history only occasionally but pursue it with an undiminished scholarly curiosity. Writing ethnographies, conducting interviews, life (hi)stories, and (auto-)biographical analyses are the most useful approaches with a limited scope in this regard. As the decades pass, the people who experienced exile, refugee camps, and displacement first-hand and suffered on long overseas journeys are no longer alive. In most cases, their valuable narratives are preserved only in rare memoirs and autobiographies, interviews, or as fragmentary testimonies or excerpts in diaspora publications.

Recently, the topic of exile seems to have fallen out of the focus of migration studies; historical cases of forced migration are less interesting compared to cosmopolitan migration and mobility (with some exceptions such as Milharčič Hladnik, 2020; Mlekuž, 2019). However, this superficial contrast is epistemic and prevents us from understanding that emigration is an inseparable part of migration phenomena. Historical cases are also valuable points of reflection and introspection, especially when compared to postmodern realities.

Without seeking to make a comparison, in this article, I examine a historical case of forced migration that is well documented in national migration research but still does not provide specific insight into the conditions of reception and subsequent settlement of Slovenian refugees¹ in Argentina after World War II. Moreover, scholars typically focus on how the Slovenian diaspora in Argentina formed an ethnic community and constructed collective identifications in a “foreign” environment. With a few exceptions (Repič, 2006; Molek, 2022), there is less focus on the circumstances of the individual refugee route or arrival and settlement in another country, the inclusiveness of Argentinean immigration policy, or even the social and economic integration of refugees in Argentina. Therefore, I deal with the conditions of exile, arrival, entry, and settlement of refugees after World War II from the perspective of Argentinean

1 I refer to Slovenian political emigrants when discussing their stay in Europe as refugees or displaced persons (DPs).

immigration policy, telling the story of individual migration paths but also including less visible, forgotten, or even hidden part of the history of migration to Argentina.

In the first part of the article, I follow the path of the refugees and discuss the subjective circumstances of the exile and the journey from Europe to Argentina. For this purpose, I mainly use the case of Bara Remec and her family, who fled Ljubljana, Yugoslavia,² in 1945 and arrived in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in early 1948. In the second part, I discuss key elements of Argentina's post-war immigration policy (especially entry policies and Peron's attitude toward immigration) in contrast to individual experiences and attempts by the Slovenian Central Refugee Committee and representatives of the Catholic Church to resettle refugees from European camps. Considering the circumstances after the end of World War II, I argue that refugees in Austrian and Italian refugee camps were caught between the repatriation policy of the Yugoslav state and the inaction of international institutions and policies. In addition, except for some South American states, traditional immigrant states refused to accept most European refugees adding to the refugees' hardship and insecurity. All this induced a small group of nationalists, philanthropists, and enthusiasts to establish a "grassroots" movement for resettlement.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Methodological challenges in the first part of the article arise from the lack of oral or written narratives, as Bara Remec and other members of her family, despite or because of their political and cultural status, lived a rather secluded life in Argentina. I carried out a textual analysis of the only two publicly published interviews with Bara Remec (Kralj, 1954; Tavčar, 1991) and analyzed some other written and oral sources: documentary material (interview with Jožejka Žakelj Debeljak, 2015; the documentary *Slikarka sinjih oči* by Simčič & Brvar, 1998–2000); archive material, and other written material (newspapers articles about members of Remec family), historical accounts, and academic literature. Among the latter are several articles by Irene Mislej (1991, 1999, 2007), which contain valuable parts of the extensive correspondence between family members. Regretfully, the correspondence has not been published in full.

To reach a more informed understanding and also contextualize this specific refugee route, I analyzed personal testimonies of other refugees, like Franc Pernišek (2007) and Ladislav Bevc (2006), and relief workers, such as John Corsellis (1996, 1997). The second part of the article is based on academic literature, including historical and political assessments of Argentinean immigration policy and historical

2 In 1943, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was renamed Democratic Federal Yugoslavia by the Partisans, but the monarchy was formally abolished in November 1945. Democratic Federal Yugoslavia was renamed the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia.

accounts of the Slovene Central Refugee Committee in Rome, and writings of Dr. Janez Hladnik (1949), a Slovenian priest in Buenos Aires.

A REFUGEE PATH: FROM EUROPEAN CAMPS TO A PROMISED LAND

Slovenian emigration to Argentina is chronologically divided into three different periods.³ However, I focus only on the last one, i.e., the post-World War II period (1947–1951), when more than 6,000 Slovenian refugees went to Argentina (Švent, 2007). As Nadia Molek (2022) emphasizes, compared to earlier migration routes, the postwar settlement was not only organized, well planned, and collective but also driven by a powerful political agenda: anti-communism and Catholicism.

The exile began in May 1945, when the German Army and quisling groups were retreating from the Yugoslav territory, and a relatively large group of Slovenians (according to different sources, there were between 20,000 and 30,000 people) left the country (Švent, 2007; Corsellis, 1997). In addition to many soldiers, civilians—including whole families, elderly, injured, and disabled people—fled across the border to Italy and Austria. Many feared the consequences of their collaboration with the Nazis. Others simply feared a new communist regime or were convinced by political leaders that the arrival of the partisans was a danger to them. Among the refugees were 35-year-old Bara Remec, her 67-year-old father Bogumil Remec, Bara's two-year-younger sister Vladimira (Lada), and her brother-in-law, Dr. Tine Debeljak, editor and poet, who was married to Bara's older sister, Vera. All four left Ljubljana on May 5, 1945. Part of the family—Bara's mother, Marija Remec, brother Bogumil, sister Vera, and Vera's three children—remained behind in the war-torn country. The youngest child was ill, and they could not make such an arduous journey (Žakelj Debeljak, 2015). According to other sources, Bara's mother, Marija, was determined to follow her husband but changed her mind just before the departure (Bevc, 2006, p. 150). Most likely, the decision to stay was connected to her age, as she was already 76 years old at that time.

Bara's father, Bogumil Remec, Sr., was politically active as a member of the Slovenska ljudska stranka (Slovene People's Party), the main opposition to the rising Communist Party (Kranjec, 2013; Prunk, 1996, p. 166), and worked closely with the compromised Slovenski domobranci (Slovene Home Army), which later changed the course of the entire family's life. He was a politician and economist, although he was a scholar most of his life. Just before the war's end, he became a member of

3 The first groups of Slovenian immigrants, about 50 families, arrived in Argentina toward the end of the 19th century, when Europeans were colonizing the vast country. They were mainly in search of better living conditions and new opportunities. The second settlement, which was also the most numerous, took place between the two world wars when about 26,000 people of Slovenian origin came to Argentina to escape the rising Fascism in Italy and/or the increasing poverty in the northwestern areas of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

the Narodni odbor za Slovenijo (Slovene National Council), which briefly took power after the German surrender and before liberation forces entered Ljubljana (Švent, 2007). He educated his children: Bara graduated from the Zagreb Academy of Fine Arts, Vera became a merchant, his son, Bogumil, Jr., a Jesuit, and the youngest, Vladimira, was one of the few who studied English in London even before World War II (Hočevár, 2011). As writers and artists, the family members did not join the resistance. They continued with publishing and other cultural activities, which—known as “cultural silence”—was against the cultural-political principle of the liberation movement (cf. Gabrič, 2001). A diary entry of Franc Pernišek, who also joined a large group of refugees that day, gives testimony to what the atmosphere was like in Ljubljana on May 5, 1945: “I went to work this morning. Like all these days, no one is working today. We all live in uncertainty and in anticipation of great events. Unfortunately, there will be no outside help. The English have stopped in Trieste and are waiting. We are lost!” (Pernišek, 2007, p. 15). In such uncertainty, the Remec family headed north toward Austria, across Ljubelj/Loibl Pass and the Drava River, stopping at the Vetrinj/Viktring refugee camp, one of the largest camps under British administration in Austria, Germany, and Italy (Corsellis, 1996). Due to overcrowded campsites, most Slovenians were transferred to Lienz and later, in 1946, to another refugee camp in Austria: Spittal (Pernišek, 2007). The Remec family stayed only a short time in Austria. Already in July 1945, Bogumil Remec, Sr. and Tine Debeljak illegally crossed the border to Italy, and in 1946, they settled in Rome (Bevc, 2006), but Debeljak later stayed in camp Riccione near Rimini (Jaklitsch, 2018, p. 200). Bara and Vlada most likely stayed in Lienz for a while, as there is no record that they were together with their father and brother-in-law when they escaped to Italy.

IN THE REFUGEE CAMP

Shortly after refugees settled in the Austrian and Italian refugee camps, an extreme event influenced their further decisions for exile. Between May 27 and May 31, i.e., two weeks after arriving in Austria, the British Army sent 10,000–12,000 Slovenian Home Guard soldiers back to Yugoslavia, where they were executed. The civilian population could stay in Austria, but they constantly feared repatriation. However, John Corsellis, a British refugee relief worker in Austria, notes that the refugees were not devastated or paralyzed by the dramatic event (Corsellis, 1997, p. 134). Contrarily, slowly, they organized a vibrant social, religious, and cultural life. Neither the flight nor the separation from the family nor the life in the camps took away Bara’s creative urge. She visited camps in Austria and Italy, where she almost always observed people and events with a sketchbook. Her sketches today also give witness to the vibrant work of refugee schools at various levels, choirs, theatre, publishing, and arts and crafts. The exhibition of the first refugee motifs from the camps in September 1945 in Lienz testifies to the fact that she was still in Austria then (Kralj, 1954, p. 18; Švent, 2007, p. 274).

Following Debeljak's article on Bara's art published in 1966, I could reconstruct Bara's movement in the following two years, from mid-1945 until the departure from Italy in 1947 (Debeljak, 1966, p. 340). In addition to the almost documentary record of camp events, Bara Remec painted portraits from Tyrol, motifs from the Trieste area, and women bathing from the refugee camp in Servigliano, which she later exhibited in Rome with refugee artists of other nationalities. Her illustrations—mostly portraits of the main actors in the rescue mission of Slovenian refugees—appeared in the first refugee publication, the *Koledarček slovenskih emigrantov za leto 1946* (*Calendar of Slovenian Emigrants of 1946*), published by Slovenski emigranti v Italiji (Slovenian Emigrants in Italy).

The Remec family was wealthy enough and had good political connections. Its members were well educated, so their refugee experiences in Austria and Italy did not match those of most Slovenian refugees, who traveled on foot and suffered from malnutrition, cold, police raids, and harassment by officials in the refugee camps (Bevc, 2006). Bogumil Remec, on the other hand, covered most of the distance by car. Since he carried a considerable amount of money with him, he could afford to buy food, pay for accommodation outside the camp in Italy, and even buy new clothes (Bevc, 2006, pp. 160–163). Thanks to their education and their father's position and connections, Bara and Lada were not in the worst circumstances. In fact, they did not live long in the Vetrinj/Viktring camp. Because of her excellent knowledge of English, Lada got a job with the Allied authorities at Vrbsko jezero/Wörthersee/Lake Wörth, and she also took Bara with her (Hočevár, 2011). From Austria, Bara Remec went to Trieste, where, at the invitation of the director Srečko Baraga, she taught drawing for a short time at the Slovenian Gymnasium (founded on October 8, 1945); in 1946, she at least visited or even stayed at the camp in Servigliano, Italy, and then went to Rome (Debeljak, 1966, p. 340). In Rome, she and Lada met with their father and Tine Debeljak (Simčič & Brvar, 1998–2000).

Refugees in Italy and Austria were under constant pressure to repatriate to Yugoslavia, which was particularly harsh in 1947 due to heightened tensions between the victorious powers and negotiations between Yugoslavia and Great Britain on returning of the refugees from Austria and Germany (Sjekloča, 2004, p. 169; cf. Pernišek, 2007; Švent, 2007). Those housed in camps also suffered from harsh living conditions and uncertainty due to Austria's and Italy's decisions to close the camps and resettle the displaced persons as soon as possible. After two years of the status quo, Slovenian refugees felt abandoned by international organizations such as the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, or UNRRA (1943–1948), and later, the International Refugee Organization, or IRO (1946–) (Pernišek, 2007, pp. 84, 97; Švent, 2007). They also felt betrayed because UNRRA and IRO actively supported repatriation and cooperated with the new Yugoslav government (Pernišek, 2007; D.R.F., 1949, pp. 163, 164).

Confronted with the ill fate of the soldiers, most Slovenian refugees in Austria and Italy opted to go overseas as displaced persons, preferably to the United States

(Košiček, 1949). Some opted to go to Canada, Australia, or other European countries. In May 1946, the process of resettlement was started by the Slovene Central Refugee Committee in Rome (Corsellis, 1997, p. 140) and a few representatives of the Catholic Church in Buenos Aires, who formed a Slovene Social Committee (Hladnik, 1949, p. 169). Argentina was promoted as the most solid and safe country in South America regarding economy and politics (anti-communism); it was prepared to accept most of them. Political leaders among refugees encouraged Slovenian refugees that resettlement would be organized since President Peron himself supported it, and immigration selections would be conducted already in Europe. According to the Slovene Social Committee leader in Buenos Aires, father Janez Hladnik (1902–1965), refugees were supposed to be sent to established colonies of farmers in the country's interior and live with other nationalities. The news came suddenly and greatly relieved many of the devastated DPs (Pernišek, 2007; Corsellis, 1997).

When all hopes of returning home disappeared, the Remec family decided to go overseas. They were transferred to Servigliano and, at last, to Bagnoli, near Naples, from where they eventually left for Argentina. The immigration selection process was already carried out in Italy by an appointed consul, who decided whether a person met the conditions for immigration set by the Argentinean state (Corsellis, 1996) and who later issued an entrance visa. Potential immigrants were medically examined, their blood was checked, and their relatives' relations were established (Pernišek, 2007). Only a few were rejected, mainly ill persons, families with infants up to 6 months, and single men older than 45 (Švent, 2007, p. 310).

At the end of the cold December of 1947, the *SS Santa Cruz* set sail from Naples and reached the port of Buenos Aires on a hot summer day in January 1948. The Remec family members were among the 300 Slovenian passengers aboard the ship (Švent, 2007, p. 311). Almost three years had passed since they left Ljubljana.

Despite her status and her father's political capital, Bara, like all other Slovenian refugees, depended on international political decisions and the arrangements of community leaders. Her independent and rebellious character (cf. Toplak, 2021) had to submit to the decisions of the collective, i.e., the family and the ethnic community. Moreover, as a knowledgeable, well-educated young Catholic woman, she was predestined for the social glamor of European capitals (Mislej, 1999, p. 95). In the 1930s, she traveled throughout Europe, exhibiting her artwork in major art centers. The prospect of an unfamiliar, culturally alien, probably rural milieu in Argentina was, therefore, not promising.

ON THE WAY TO A "PROMISED" LAND

Like many other ships carrying refugees across the Atlantic, the *SS Santa Cruz* was a military supply ship used to transport goods between the United States and Europe during the war and was ill-equipped to carry passengers. People had

accommodations in large cabins or spent time on the deck. There is no available record of how the members of the Remec family experienced the 23-day voyage aboard the *SS Santa Cruz*. However, according to other sources, overseas voyages were tiring and exhausting; each transport was affected by symptoms of seasickness: nausea, vomiting, and digestive problems (Švent, 2007, p. 314). One was even affected by food poisoning (Pernišek, 2007). Refugees were separated by gender, and families could not stay together. Before reaching the port of Buenos Aires, another medical team examined the passengers, and only in rare cases was someone denied disembarkation, mainly because of serious illnesses. In such cases, people were denied entry to Argentina and had to return on the same ship (Pernišek, 2007).

After disembarkation in the port of Buenos Aires, the refugees, who had received authorization from the Argentinean consul in Italy, were housed in a grey complex of buildings near the port, the Hotel de Inmigrantes (Immigrants' Hotel). Arriving at the Hotel de Inmigrantes was also a first reality check for Bara. In one of the interviews, she stated that it was a boring, grey building that she wanted to leave immediately (Kralj, 1954). Housing conditions in the immigrant hotel varied over time. However, from 1947 to 1950, free housing was provided for two weeks, a maximum of three, during which residents were expected to find work and new housing outside the hotel. The new residents of Argentina were on their own, without restrictions, but without much help from the new state. As Argentina did not formally accept the internationally recognized status of a refugee until 1948 (before that, refugees did not exist in a political, legal, or administrative sense), the state was free of any obligation to support or restrict the refugees (Devoto, 2004, p. 40). The only ones they could turn to and rely on were some Slovenian compatriots who had come to Buenos Aires earlier, especially in the interwar period, and who opened their own houses to the newcomers (Hladnik, 1949). Very soon after their arrival, the immigrants received new identity papers to move freely in the city (Corsellis, 1996, p. 64).

Already in Argentina, refugees realized that the image of the country they got from the representatives of the resettlement committee, especially Jože Košiček, was idealized, and reality was hard (Pernišek, 2007). The new environment of Buenos Aires was a shock to most of the refugees from a small, predominantly rural country. Large buildings, wide avenues, a different climate, a large river resembling the sea, and 4 million inhabitants of different origins speaking *Castellano* (Castilian). In one of his letters sent to the refugee leaders still in the camp, Košiček described the basic conditions of the country. He "advertised" Argentina as "a very rich country" with a hot but not insupportable climate and also told of how farmers have several hours of siesta after lunch and how land is easily acquired and cultivated, concluding, "You cannot imagine how easy the work is here" (Corsellis, 1997, p. 144). He intended to persuade the majority of undecided about this overseas destination. However, he also warned the Slovenian intelligentsia and students that they must be prepared for manual work and that previously finished exams would not be acknowledged, so they would have to repeat them in Argentina in good Spanish.

Argentina was not a promised land: for one thing, it was very different from what they knew, and for another, they did not settle here voluntarily. Moreover, as we will examine in the second part of the article, Slovenians were not among the desirable ethnic groups to enter the country. For newcomers, adapting to the new climate, language, and habits, finding suitable housing, gaining economic independence, and overcoming psychological problems were initially difficult. Anticipating negative reactions to the new society and also because the new, different environment started affecting people's health, the physician Dr. Ivan Kačar, another refugee, advised the newly settled Slovenians in Argentina in an article published in one of the first publications for immigrants in Argentina (1949). Kačar particularly pointed out the climatic differences (hot sun, extreme temperature differences, and low pressure) and health problems related to social and cultural differences (in connection to the preparation and consumption of food, poor accommodation, choice of clothing, zoonosis and sexually transmitted diseases, increased stress, and excessive alcohol consumption) (Kačar, 1949, pp. 182–185). For most, enforced resettlement overseas and the culture shock that followed were still better than slow decay in European refugee camps or repatriation to Yugoslavia that could end in prosecution.

FROM REFUGEES TO IMMIGRANTS

After all, the Argentinean government's unpromising demand that most refugees have to move to the countryside did not materialize. Most Slovenian refugees stayed in Buenos Aires,⁴ where manual work was easy to find in construction, heavy industry, or housekeeping. As Argentina experienced an economic boom, albeit short-lived, work was plentiful. Some employers were already visiting the immigrant hotel in search of simple laborers, bricklayers, helpers, and other profiles of workers (Hladnik, 1949).

All members of the Remec family were well educated. However, since they had practically no social network and language was a barrier, they, like other European refugees, took any job offered to them. The elder professor Remec began to work as a keeper in the botanical gardens. Bara wanted to teach at a private art school, but her poor language skills were unacceptable. She eventually got a job in a small ceramics workshop decorating plates, where she was not "happy" (Kralj, 1954, p. 20; Tavčar, 1991). Bara also created small figurines of clay, leather, wood, and other natural materials and sold them to souvenir shops in downtown Buenos Aires to earn extra money for art materials (Simčič & Brvar, 1998–2000). The brother-in-law, who had a doctorate in Slavic languages, began working in a pharmaceutical factory as a glass washer and later found more permanent employment in the Loma Negra

4 According to the central Slovenian immigrant association in Argentina, almost 5,000 Slovenian refugees stayed in Buenos Aires, 485 went to Mendoza, 70 to Rio Negro, around 60 to Cordoba, 50 to San Luis, and other provinces of the Argentinean state (cf. Repič, 2006, p. 209).

cement company outside Buenos Aires, first as a porter and later as a clerk. The family found a small apartment on the street Calle Juncal, near the botanical gardens in the city center. In 1955, as part of the family reunification program overseen by the International Red Cross, Bara's sister Vera and her three children joined the family and remained in Argentina (Mislej, 2007, p. 474).⁵

REFUGEES BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS: ARGENTINA'S IMMIGRATION POLICY AND THE ROLE OF THE SLOVENE SOCIAL COMMITTEE

After World War II, Yugoslav and other European refugees or displaced persons posed a major political, social, and demographic challenge to the Allies, the international community, and the European countries where they involuntarily resided. These events occurred before the UN refugee agency UNCHR was formally established, and it was the first time in European history that so many people were displaced. Subjective narratives highlight the plight and vulnerability of DPs and their unequal situation. The case of Bara Remec and her family showed that even privileged and well-connected people had to submit to the political decisions of the post-war world leaders.

Bara Remec's family and other displaced persons in Austria and Italy (also Germany) had only two choices: to return to Yugoslavia and face possible prosecution or go to one of the overseas states that were historically immigrant states and were prepared to take in people from war-torn Europe. Also, in the latter, possibilities were limited. The United States, Canada, or Australia, with their straightforward and discriminatory policies (with quota systems or sponsorship obligations or admitting only young and healthy able-bodied people), were not options for the majority of DPs, especially for a rather large group of Slovenians, as mentioned before, consisting predominantly of families, intellectuals, and older people. The second option was South American countries (Santo Domingo, Venezuela, Columbia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil) that expressed willingness to accept refugees but could not offer any financial subsistence for costly transfer (Pernišek, 2007). As the resettlement of Slovenian refugees was at a standstill, Slovenian politicians, public officials, and church representatives reacted. In 1945, the Central Slovene Refugee Committee was established in Rome. It was coordinated by Slovenian politician Miha

5 Like most Slovenian post-war refugees, Bara Remec and her family were convinced that they would return to Slovenia, if not next year, then perhaps in ten years (Kralj, 1954). In this respect, the Slovenian post-war ethnic community that formed in Argentina used all necessary means to preserve its ethnic identity and to prevent integration into Argentinean society. But the system they feared in "the old country" lasted until 1991, when Slovenia gained its independence and the first democratic elections were held. Few members of the first generation of refugees returned to Europe. The Remec family never made it. The father died in 1955, Bara in 1991, and Tine Debeljak in 1989.

Krek (1879–1969), a former minister of the Yugoslav government in exile. In early 1946, the committee sent a questionnaire to Slovenian refugees in Italy and Austria to establish their preferences and find possible new locations for several thousands of refugees (Košiček, 1949). Krek was assisted by Jože Košiček (1898–1979), a priest, journalist, and refugee, who published a brief but telling report on committee tasks that included the prompt study of climate, hygienic, socioeconomic, and religious conditions in those states and form contacts with official representatives and also compatriots and friends in several South American states.⁶ According to Košiček (1949), a long-time nuncio in South America, Monsignor Cortese initiated the idea of Argentina as the most suitable country.

Contrary to the popular and repeatedly generated image that Argentina officially accepted all immigrants (refugees) regardless of their age and health status (quite unlike Australia or Canada), the reality was just the opposite. In various historical accounts, diaspora publications, and even some academic writings (Corsellis, 1997; Švent, 2007), the state of affairs in the field of immigration policy in postwar Argentina is downplayed. The fact that most refugees could settle in Argentina despite their social and demographic disadvantages was simply attributed to the state's generosity. Regarding the number of immigrants admitted, the Argentinean state was indeed one of the most generous overseas states in admitting DPs from Europe in the post-war period (Genorio, 1991, p. 130). However, Argentinean immigration policy in the postwar period was not so different from other states in terms of restrictions. Official Argentinean migration policy in 1946–1955 was selective and discriminatory. What factors then enabled Slovenian and other European refugees in the post-World War II period to enter Argentina and settle there?

To understand how the Remec family and other Slovenian refugees eventually entered and settled in Argentina, we need to see beyond the subjective experiences and discuss the complex interplay of political, socioeconomic, and demographic factors that shaped the decision-making in immigration in postwar Argentina.

IMMIGRATION POLICY IN ARGENTINA: POLICIES AND PERSONAL DECISIONS

Immigration policy in Argentina has been historically shaped by the processes of colonization and mass immigration, especially from Europe. Recognizing fundamental rights for foreigners was part of Argentina's nation-building as an independent country. As in many countries worldwide, it has undergone many changes since then, reflecting a tension between the rights of foreigners and state sovereignty (García, 2021; Novick, 2012).

⁶ In 1946, Košiček was among first refugees to Argentina, where he joined Hladnik in the attempts to resettle refugees from Italy and Austria.

In 1946, a restrictive immigration policy adopted in the period 1930–1945, as a result of a difficult international economic situation, was replaced by a new policy that (still) “encouraged European immigration and stipulated that all those that entered the country without violating the laws enjoyed Argentines’ civil rights as well as political rights five years after having obtained citizenship” (Novick, 2012, pp. 211–212). Nevertheless, the policy was driven by selection and guidance criteria.

Despite official propaganda about a harmoniously achieved “melting pot of races” (*crisol de las rasas*), the Dirección General de Migraciones (General Directorate of Migration) pursued a clear agenda. As a state institution, a kind of “guardian of the native population,” it selected immigrants according to state criteria; it barred undesirable immigrants who might endanger internal stability and refused entry to the sick and disabled, who might burden the state or social institutions. Like other industrialized countries, Argentina sought the best immigrants, young people willing to work, technicians, experienced workers, industrialists, etc. (Schneider, 2000, p. 95). New immigrants were already advised to conceal their “undesirable” expertise in European refugee camps. The case of one young refugee describes a Slovenian history, philosophy, and psychology student at the University of Graz. The migration office in Austria advised him to declare a practical profession instead of what he was. He was eventually registered as an electrician (Corsellis, 1996).

Economy, demography, and ethnicity were essential in shaping the state’s immigration policy (Bjerg, 2009). The Argentinean government favored immigration primarily of “traditional” immigrant groups, i.e., Spaniards and Italians, who already owned most of the land and capital in Argentina and thus constituted the most influential elite. In the first years after World War II, Argentina concluded agreements with Italy and Spain that included provisions regulating emigration from both countries (Schneider, 2000, p. 94). Shares of arriving immigrants by nations can be reflected in Table 1.

Period/ Nationalities	Italians	Spaniards	Poles	Yugoslavs (Slovenians*)	Austrians
1945–1950	274,098	101,722	14,308	11,167 (5,168)	5,504

Table 1: Immigrants to Argentina in numbers: the first postwar period 1945–1950 (included are only those who came via sea). Source: Ministry of Interior, Argentina. *Number of passengers of Slovenian ethnicity on board the ships to Argentina in the same period (Švent, 2007, pp. 311–313).

Susana Novick points out that state control expanded in the period up to 1946, becoming interventionist. She says that the Ministry of Agriculture was the public body responsible for formulating the immigration policy (Novick, 2012, pp. 211–212).

For Janez Hladnik, a Slovenian priest in Buenos Aires, the Ministry of Agriculture was also the first reference point in his attempts to resettle Slovenian refugees in Europe.

In 1944, Hladnik, who arrived in Argentina in 1936 and was well acquainted with the overall state of affairs of the country, was not in favor of the settlement of Slovenians in Argentina, as the economic situation in Argentina was not good. Instead, he proposed Bolivia and Ecuador as the new locations for resettlement. Only at the suggestion of the Slovene Refugee Committee in Rome did he start intensive petitioning at the Argentinean Ministry of Agriculture and Directorate of Migration, but in vain. Finally, on November 20, 1946, his acquaintance, minister of public health Ramon Carillo, helped Hladnik to an audience with President Juan D. Peron (Hladnik, 1949, p. 168).

In the design and implementation of the postwar immigration/entrance policy in Argentina, there is a complex dynamic of political, demographic, and socio-economic factors, as well as personal interests, behind the process. We cannot understand the case under study without considering Juan D. Peron and his attitude toward immigration and his ideological orientation since they played a key role in the settlement of postwar refugees in Argentina. President Peron was a military person, colonel, and later general and favored authoritarian/totalitarian forces. He is also connected to capital and social policies (trade unions, family protection), populism, and anti-communism (Luna, 2008, p. 179). According to Hladnik, Peron's response to his appeal to allow the admission of several thousand Slovenian refugees was positive in an absolutist manner: "I want these people to come to Argentina. Tell them to leave their old quarrels in Europe" (Hladnik, 1949, p. 169; my emphasis). The question of his motives for allowing a group of several thousand refugees with economically and politically insignificant national backgrounds into the country cannot be easily answered. Some authors claim that there was a strong ideological link between Peronism and fascism (Sjekloča, 2004; Repič, 2006; Luna, 2008; Bjerg, 2009) and that Peron, therefore, sympathized with the plight of a group of anti-communists—many of whom also collaborated with the Axis powers. Another argument for Peron's willingness to accept Slovenian (and also other Yugoslav) refugees was their Catholicism, as, at that time, he strategically tightened his political movement and government's social policies to the Roman Catholic Church (Luna, 2008). Church representatives in Argentina, with abundant help from church organizations on the other side of the Atlantic, also actively collaborated in the process of resettlement of refugees. Marko Sjekloča (2004, p. 170) claims that the representatives of the Church used any means, including illegal ones, to relocate people to Argentina. Forged Argentinean and Red Cross passports allowed people to freely leave refugee camps in Italy and Austria and embark on ships to cross the Atlantic.

Even with Peron's support and the Church's questionable actions, the process of resettlement was slow and fraught with obstacles. Pernišek and Košiček report that, apart from the bureaucratic immigration procedure, the biggest obstacle was the financing of the sea voyage, as international organizations and the Argentinean

government was not willing to cover these costs (Pernišek, 2007; Košiček, 1949). At first, Hladnik could arrange resettlement only for a few refugees from Italy. Six of them, including Košiček, became his close associates in the Slovene Social Committee, which was established specifically for further resettlement efforts (Hladnik, 1949). Finally, the IRO and the Catholic Church provided enough resources to cover the Atlantic sea fare for most refugees (Žigon, 2001, p. 72).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I focus on the circumstances and driving forces behind individuals' decision to exile at the end of World War II in Slovenia (as part of Yugoslavia) and the subsequent subjective experiences of flight, displacement, and eventual resettlement. Among the Slovenian refugees in Austria and later in Italy was also painter Bara Remec with her family, whose three-year escape route I follow in the first part of the article. Under difficult circumstances, most Slovenian refugees opted not to return to Yugoslavia but to settle elsewhere—mainly in Argentina. An interplay of different factors that enabled the arrival of this group of people to Argentina is discussed in the second part of the article, concluding that the Argentinean immigration policy was not the decisive one among these factors.

Firstly, it was a political agreement or interest bypassing the official immigration policy or, at that time, the economy, enforced by President Peron himself.⁷ Humanitarian motives did not drive him, as the Argentine kept a neutral position almost until the end of the war, and at the same time, maintained political and economic relations with the Axis powers. As Maria Bjerg points out, this new impulsive opening of the state granted access to refugees, victims of the war, and the perpetrators, war criminals, and supporters of National Socialism alike (Bjerg, 2009).

Secondly, the Slovenians were granted an immigration permit on the condition that they would be politically inactive and that there would be no persons of leftist political orientation among them. In fact, like the other political refugees, they had to be "anti-communist oriented." The strong anti-communist position of Peron's government got even stronger after the climax of the political conflict between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in 1948, and it influenced its immigration policies. In October 1948, the immigration policy was again adapted to the new situation. The issuance of entry permits to persons born in Slavic countries and to persons associated with the Soviet Union, including Yugoslavia, was prohibited. The only exceptions were persons of Slavic origin residing at that time in Austria, Italy, and Finland (Genorio, 1991, p. 132). An important fact is that in absolute numbers,

7 Although Peron was a controversial political figure, many Slovenian immigrants or refugees after World War II were aware of the importance of his role in these events (Žigon, 2001).

Slovenian refugees were still a small group compared to Italian, Spanish, or even Polish and Austrian immigrants to Argentina in the same period (see Table 1 above).

Third, resettlement would not be possible without the hard and persistent work of the two committees run by Slovenian politicians in exile and enthusiasts and priests in Argentina. Prompt preparation and research of countries' environment and socioeconomic conditions, persistent lobbying, and constant exchange of information enabled the move of more than 6,000 people to Argentina. Finally, refugees' Catholic orientation and the role of the Roman Catholic Church, especially the influence of the highest clergy in the Vatican, must also be considered. The Catholic Church actively supported this resettlement by providing information, financial resources, and political influence. When presidential wife Eva Duarte Peron visited the Vatican in 1947, she was reportedly approached by the high representatives of the Church to support the reception of refugees in Argentina.

The arrival and subsequent settlement of Slovenians in Argentina after World War II is therefore characterized by an ideological and specific "grassroots" approach, influenced by political decisions and socioeconomic circumstances both in the state they had to leave and in the new state to which they were resettled. It could be argued that President Peron and his government circumvented the restrictive immigration policies of the period in question and that the key characteristics (anti-communist, Catholic, small in number, pro-totalitarian) of this relatively small group of refugees played a crucial role in the government's decision-making.

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POVZETEK

OD BEGUNCEV DO PRISELJENCEV: IZZIVI PRESELJEVANJA SLOVENCEV V ARGENTINO V ČASU PO DRUGI SVETOVNI VOJNI

Kristina Toplak

V nacionalnih migracijskih študijah je naseljevanje slovenskih povojnih beguncev v Argentini še posebej dobro dokumentirano, vendar pa še vedno nimamo natančnejšega vpogleda v same pogoje vstopa v Argentino za slovenske povojne begunce. Avtorica se v prispevku osredotoča na okoliščine in vzgibe posameznikov, ki so se ob koncu druge svetovne vojne odločili za beg iz Slovenije (kot dela Jugoslavije), ter na kasnejše subjektivne izkušnje razselitve in morebitne ponovne naselitve. Po drugi svetovni vojni je takratno Jugoslavijo zapustilo 20.000–30.000 slovenskih prebivalcev, ki so se v strahu pred novo, komunistično oblastjo zatekli v Avstrijo, Italijo in celo Nemčijo. Po tragični prisilni repatriaciji večinoma domobranskih vojakov v Jugoslavijo in njihovem izvensodnem poboju je več tisoč civilistov, predvsem družin, starejših ljudi, intelektualcev, kmetov in študentov še nadaljnja dve do tri leta, nekateri še dlje, ostalo v begunskih taboriščih kot razseljene osebe. Med temi begunci je bila tudi slikarka Bara Remec z družino.

V članku so v ospredju položaj in izkušnje posameznika, konkretno begunska pot Bare Remec in njene družine ob koncu druge svetovne vojne, od njihovega bega maja 1945 do naselitve v Argentini leta 1948. Avtorica je subjektivno izkušnjo, kot jo je lahko zabeležila na osnovi različnih pisnih in ustnih naracij, postavila nasproti uradni argentinski priseljski politiki tistega časa, zlasti z vidika pogojev prihoda in naselitve. Kot ključne akterje pri procesu preselitve v Argentino je opredelila majhno skupino slovenskih nacionalistov, človekoljubov in entuziastov, predvsem iz vrst duhovnikov in politikov v pregnanstvu, ter samega predsednika Argentine Juana D. Perona.

Glavne ugotovitve so, da so bile priseljske politike tudi v Argentini podobno restriktivne kot v ostalih tradicionalnih priseljskih državah, predvsem v Severni Ameriki in Avstraliji, a da so bili učinki teh politik drugačni zaradi odločitve samega predsednika Juana D. Perona, ki je priseljence sprejel ob vztrajnem lobiranju slovenskega duhovnika Janeza Hladnika. Glede na uradno veljavno priseljsko politiko Argentine slovenski razseljenci iz evropskih begunskih taborišč ne bi mogli nikoli vstopiti v to južnoameriško državo. Tudi ostale, povsem organizacijske in izvedbene okoliščine (neaktivnost mednarodne skupnosti, naklonjenost zmagovalcev vojne repatriaciji v Jugoslavijo, draga pot čez ocean, pomanjkanje politične volje) so govorile proti takšnemu poteku dogodkov. Tako je imelo ključno vlogo pri ustvarjanju sprejemljivih in odprtih pogojev za vstop slovenskih beguncev v Argentino tako imenovano »ljudsko gibanje« za preselitev na obeh straneh Atlantskega oceana, v Rimu in Buenos Airesu. Avtorica trdi, da je predsednik Peron zaobšel veljavne restriktivne politike priseljevanja v tistem obdobju, pri čemer so veliko vlogo pri odločanju

argentinske vlade o dovoljenju za sprejem odigrale ključne značilnosti te relativno majhne skupine beguncev v Argentini (protikomunizem, katolištvo, maloštevilnost in celo naklonjenost totalitarizmu).

