

## IN MEMORIAM

### REMEMBERING HENRY A. CHRISTIAN 1931 - 1997

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It was April, 1976. A midnight train put me down at a dark deserted railway station which looked to me very much like the middle of nowhere: Princeton Junction. There was no train, no bus or taxi to take me to Princeton at that hour. A kind woman gave me a lift to the town's "Peacock Inn" where I spent my first night in

America ever. I was 25, striving towards a master's degree in American literature, and had come to Princeton in order to research the papers of a Slovene-born author named Louis Adamic that had, paradoxically, been little known in his homeland. At Princeton I was to get in touch with America's leading connoisseur of Adamic's life and work. Henry A. Christian was his name and he was Professor of American literature at Rutgers University.

The first meeting was to take place on my first day in America and I anticipated it with some trepidation. What would the Professor be like? I somehow expected an elderly, austere man... Our first meeting was arranged in the Firestone Library and he arrived on time: a not-too-tall youngish man in his forties, handsome and – contrary to my



*Tine Kurent: Henry A. Christian v Bohinju, 1969 (ogljje)*

foreboding – of extremely gentle demeanor. He remained that way throughout my stay at Princeton, seeing me regularly once a week – Wednesdays – when we would discuss my work-in-progress as well as Louis Adamic's life and career in general. Professor Christian impressed me as someone who really knew a lot about "Louis", as he called him, and his work but also, which was very important, as someone who did his best to understand the man. One could feel right away that the two shared a sort of spiritual connection that extended beyond Adamic's grave.

My first visit to America was a complete success. The two months passed away in no time. I felt at home and Professor Christian's friendly attitude had a lot to do with it.

Later we would see each other on various occasions – at international symposia, conferences, during his several visits to Slovenia. We would share the news concerning our work as well as our plans. We worked together on the translation of Adamic's letters into Slovene. It was his idea and his selection. I translated while he provided the explanations which were needed to do it correctly. Although "long-distance", working together was fun and I fondly remember those times. Still later, after he had already been shaken by personal tragedies in his life, he would tell me about it in retrospect as if wanting to explain why he had always so strictly kept his personal life away from me. In those days he was no longer "Professor" to me but Henry, a dear friend and an indispensable part of "my America". In regular intervals I would learn that he was in Slovenia again but so busy we could only arrange to have a quick lunch together or even meet on his last day when I would come to his hotel early in the morning to pick him up and drive him to the airport. It became a laughing matter between us: yes, we'll meet again if only perhaps on the way to the airport... While we rode in the car, we would share the news. I learned about his projects to have Adamic translated to Japanese and how he would write the introductory essay, how he planned to attend this conference or that and say something about Adamic he'd never said before... Henry never complained. Even when telling me about the saddest chapters of his life, he did it sort of matter-of-factly as if wanting to say that things could not be changed. Sometimes I thought how much he must have suffered and how well he was able to deal with it, never realizing that one day the terrible burden would take its toll. Typically, he kept the news about his illness to himself. He may already have been ill when we met for the last time two years ago but he never said a word. I got a present from him, a beautiful set of a fork

and two spoons for my little son. He couldn't have chosen better: the feeding spoon, the teaspoon and the fork – all decorated with tiny Noah's ark motifs on the handles – are my son's favorites and in daily use. "Uncle Henry's" gift is highly appreciated and he is with us every day. To me, personally, Henry lives on. Sometimes I find myself wishing that he would call me again one of these days – if only to say hello and ask me to give him a lift to the airport. Then I would be able to tell him how much I appreciate the inspiration he has been to me.

PIROČKA IN

RAZMIŠLJANJA

REPORTS AND

REFLECTIONS