

**THE LITERARY CREATIVITY OF SLOVENE
MIGRANTS IN AUSTRALIA IN ENGLISH:
THE SECOND LANDING BY VICTORIA
ZABUKOVEC**

Igor Maver

I

The literary creativity of Slovene migrants began immediately after the greatest inflow of migrants to Australia after World War Two, at the beginning of the 1950s. It has seen a lively development until the present day. In the work of poets as, for example, Bert pribac, Pavla Gruden, Jože Žohar, Danijela Hliš, Peter Košak, Draga Gelt, Cilka Žagar and Ivan Kobač, there is some bilingualism present, although the core of their work nevertheless remains to be written in the Slovene language. Especially the younger, the second generation of Slovene migrants' children (Irena Birsa, Michelle Leber), mostly born in Australia, writes merely in English, while some of the writers of the first generation write in English only (e. g. Victoria Zabukovec, Janko Majnik). The language (English) is in their case only a medium of expression, which does not in the least diminish their connectedness with Sloveneness.

Bilingualism or rather writing in English falls within the framework of Australian multiculturalism and the changed conditions especially in the eighties and at the beginning of the nineties. 'Displacement' in a physical as well as a spiritual sense resulted in the fact that many migrants, due to their acculturation and integration, intimately and artistically increasingly experienced the new land Australia as a happy 'promised land' and consequently accept it as their new homeland. Slovene migrants have been for many years practically cut off from their motherland, because of the great distance and expensive travel. This

has radically changed during the past decade, because of their greater economic independence and the fact that intercontinental jet travel has become cheaper. During this time Slovenia became a sovereign and independent state, which influenced especially strongly the conscience of the Slovene diaspora abroad. Despite this the so-called 'return migration' was relatively weak, for many migrants already accepted Australia as their second homeland and returned there after their visit(s) to Slovenia. In the long years of migration they have been subject to the processes of adaptation and assimilation, which is why they often experience a certain spiritual and linguistic 'schizophrenia' (i. e. dividedness) and use along with the Slovene language also (or even exclusively) the English language in their artistic creativity. A similar process of literary bilingualism can be noticed also in other target countries of Slovene migration. Their descendants, the second and the third generation of migrants, given certain exceptions, use in writing literature only English.

Despite the fact that the poetry of Michelle Leber, Irena Birsa, (partly) the poetry and prose of Danijela Hliš and the documentaristic prose of Victoria Zabukovec and Janko Majnik is written in English, it represents the fruit of experiences and feelings of a Slovene, although it is on the border between the 'Australian' and 'migrant' experience of Australia. Other European migrant emittive nations, too, know the same process of writing in English, they research it and, even if only conditionally, often place it within the sphere of their national literatures.¹

II

Victoria Zabukovec was born in 1930 in Bulgaria. She came to Australia as a D.P. after the Second World War, in 1948. In the 1950s she studied history, English and German at the University in Adelaide in South Australia. After her study she taught at various private and public

¹ See Igor Maver, Introduction, *Ethnic Literature and Culture in the U.S.A., Canada, and Australia*, Igor Maver (ed.). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996, pp. 9-27.

schools and also worked on the Bulgarian ethnic radio in Adelaide and in organizations connected with migration. She married a Slovene and has been to Slovenia several times, with which she entered in a special intimate relationship.

*The Second Landing*² is her first novel, which in many ways draws also on the Slovene migrant experience in Australia. This is why it should be, despite the author's origin, grouped together with the literary works of Slovene migrants, for it is to a great extent based on the life experiences of her Slovene husband. Zabukovec currently works on her second novel, which takes its subject-matter from the disintegration of political and ideological systems after World War Two. She also writes poems in English, published in *Svobodni razgovori*, the literary bulletin of SALAC, the Slovene-Australian Literary Circle in Sydney.

The Second Landing is a typical example of historical fiction, a 'migrant' or 'multicultural' novel. This memoiristic novel contains numerous elements of fiction, fictionalized biographies of the protagonists as well as sheer historical documentarism, and recounts the stories of several migrants or D.P.s from various countries of Eastern Europe after the Second World War, those that migrated to Australia during 1947 and 1952; the title of course symbolically also signifies the second inflow of European migrants to Australia, after the first settlement in 1788. The author's point of view is historical, but within this framework she deftly draws her fictional characters, although not everyone of them is psychologically complex and round enough. This work represents an attempt at a novel by a migrant, who is not of Slovene origin, but who is through her Slovene husband closely connected with the Slovene community in Australia and its experiences. The novel is written in English and it could be said it is artistically convincing and successful, although it may have a greater documentary-historical than a sheer artistic value.

The structure of the book *The Second Landing* is quite interesting, because it contains a number of interpolated passages taken from actual

² Victoria Zabukovec, *The Second Landing*, Penneshaw, Kangaroo: Anchorage Publishing, 1993.

historical documents (printed in the book in italics): it can therefore be labelled as a memoiristic or historical fiction. These interpolations are lengthy quotations presenting accurate historical data, facts and events. This historical framework is then applied by the author to individual personal destinies of the 'displaced persons' from the various countries of Eastern Europe. The novel consists of three volumes or thematic clusters, titled "The Europeans", "The New Australians" and "The Second Generation", tracing the spiritual development and growth as well as the increasing acculturation of migrants in Australia. Before embarking on the fictionalization of this historical period and the description of the programme designed for the settlement of 'displaced persons' or refugees, which Australia undertook immediately after the war, Victoria Zabukovec carried out ample research documentary work. Since 1981 she had been studying the archives of the Department of Migration and Ethnic Affairs in Adelaide. Much of the material and historical documents, pertaining to the Australian migrant settlement programme after the war, which the author incorporated into the book, is nowadays kept in the Australian National Library in Canberra. Along with this, Zabukovec interviewed thirty-five individuals of almost every nationality from the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, who told her their life stories and experiences of the settlement in Australia: she used these fairly long interviews in the book.

The author presents in the book fictionalized biographies of individuals from various countries, from the Baltic countries, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and the countries of the former Yugoslavia. She uses several Slovene names of the protagonists (e. g. Janez, Stanko), although she does not focus on the specific Slovene situation during the Second World War; she concentrates in this regard on the Serbian and Croation situation. Rather than in History with the capital letter, she is primarily interested in how the 'great' historical events are reflected in everyday human lives, during the war, in reugee camps and the consequent settlement in Australia. It is an epic view of the history of both the countries of this part of Europe and Australia. The author states in the introduction that instead of a historical chronicle she wanted to write a historical novel, where historical facts are left unchanged, whereas the protagonists in the novel are fictionalized to a lesser or greater degree.

Janez, one of the protagonists, after his arrival to Australia participates in the demanding project of building hydropower plants in the Snowy Mountains. The reader may, perhaps, recognize in him Ivan Kobal, who did in fact work on the project, together with many other displaced persons, and wrote about it in his novel *Men Who Built the Snowy* (1982, rpt. 1984, 1993).³ The ending of the novel is very telling and points to the split personality of all the protagonists, whether they are aware of it or not. Victoria Zabukovec describes a visit of the former refugees in their native country. After the initial enthusiasm about 'home', which has changed substantially during their absence, they can hardly wait to return "back home to Australia", which is especially emphasized by the author. The protagonists with their life experiences have during a few decades of migration become Australians and have accepted Australia as their home. In describing historical events it is characteristic that the writer for the most part does not comment upon historical events or deeds of an individual protagonist from a subjective point of view, but tries to be all along as objective, as detached as possible. Her characters seem to be predetermined, caught in fatal events they cannot avoid. However, the fact remains: her literary point of view is nevertheless essentially historical. The characters are partly too typified and even aestheticized, but always drawn with a sure writer's hand.

The novel is written in perfect English, which can be seen in the perfect mastering of the Australian idiom. It is full of dialogues that endow the narrative with vividness and directness, since they are lively and very realistic. The book represents a happy fusion of historical data and fiction: it is a hybrid literary form, which would best belong to the genre of fictionalized biographies and historical fiction. It seems fitting to end by quoting from the earlier mentioned ending of the novel. It describes the by now acculturated protagonists, partly European and partly Australian, who after a re-visit of the 'old country' in Europe gladly return 'home' to Australia, despite the strong awareness of their roots:

³ For more see Mirko Jurak, "V iskanju narodnostne samobitnosti," *Literarne in gledališke interpretacije in presoje*, Mirko Jurak (ed.). Ljubljana: DZS, 1988, pp. 132-135.

"It has been wonderful, but I am glad to be going home to Australia," said Anna and the others expressed similar sentiments.

Rosemary looked at them. Here they were all partly European, partly Australian. At various moments in their lives, one or the other element of their heritage would come to the fore. They had experienced some of the most dramatic moments of their lives in the lands of their ancestors, but they were all going home to Australia. There was no doubt about that in their minds and hearts (Zabukovec 408).

POVZETEK

LITERARNO USTVARJANJE SLOVENSКИH IZSELJENCEV V AVSTRALIJI V ANGLEŠKEM JEZIKU: THE SECOND LANDING (DRUGI PRISTANEK) VICTORIJE ZABUKOVEC

Igor Maver

Članek najprej opiše dvojezično literarno ustvarjalnost (v slovenščini in angleščini) slovenskih izseljencev v Avstraliji, ki sodi v okvir akulturacije ter avstralskega multikulturalizma. Ti izseljenci, ki pišejo v obeh jezikih ali celo zgolj v angleščini, med njimi je tudi Victorija Zabukovec, že sprejemajo Avstralijo kot svojo novo domovino.

Victorija Zabukovec sicer ni slovenskega rodu, marveč je poročena s Slovencem. Svojo lastno pot in izkušnjo slovenstva in izseljenstva svojega moža deloma vključuje v svoj obsežni roman *The Second Landing* (1993). Ta med drugim opisuje tudi življenjske izkušnje njenega moža Slovenca in predstavlja značilen in uspešen primer zgodovinske proze. Prav tako vsebuje elemente proze in romansiranih biografij protagonistov iz različnih dežel vzhodne in jugovzhodne Evrope, vključno s

Slovenijo (npr. Janeza, Stanka), tistih, ki so emigrirali v Avstralijo takoj po drugi svetovni vojni.

Avtorica večinoma ne komentira individualnih zgodovinskih dogodkov ali dejanj posameznika s subjektivnega stališča, marveč poskuša biti ves čas karseda objektivna. Njeni protagonisti se zdijo predeterminirani, ujeti v odločilne in usodne dogodke, katerim se ne morejo izogniti. Roman je napisan v odlični angleščini, je poln živahnih in življenjskih dialogov ter priča o duhovni razseljenosti priseljencev prve generacije v Avstralijo po drugi svetovni vojni.

¹ Vojta, *Malta*, Peter Vabriglav, *Malta* (Ljubljana: Slovenski inštitut, 1992), 19–20; *Malta* (Ljubljana: Slovenski inštitut, 1992), 20–21; *Malta* (Ljubljana: Slovenski inštitut, 1992), 21–22.