

Slovenian literature abroad*

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The cultural, historical, and political position of the Slovenian inhabitants, who live as a national minority in the framework of the Italian state, is similar to that living in Austrian Carinthia; it is dealt with in details and it is described by a special informative study in this review, therefore let us only summarize it briefly.

With the Rapallo treaty in 1920, which defined the western border between the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians and Italy, a fairly large area of territory settled by the Slovenians only, remained on the Italian side of the border. In this area there were also two historically significant centres of the Slovenians, these are Trst (Trieste) and Gorica (Gorizia), of which especially the first one had a very long and rich tradition.

The treaty signed by the two states assured the Slovenian minority various kinds of protection, which soon proved to be only a piece of paper, like in Carinthia. Already in 1920 the Italian Fascists, nationalists, burnt down the centre of the Slovenian cultural life in Trieste, the Slovenian National Home. This event had long echoed in Slovenian literature written in Trieste (Pahor: *Kres v pristanu* "Bonfire in the Port"), especially because this was a cruel, fatal and symbolic deed. After the victorious Mussolini's march to Rome, in 1922, the physical and other kinds of pressure on the Slovenians increased from one year to another. "The Slovenian language was being banished from schools,... the Slovenian publications were suppressed in all possible ways, many people were imprisoned and employees were transferred into the central parts of Italy. A number of cultural workers and writers had to move to the Yugoslav side of the border" (Legisa). Before the year 1918 the publishing and printing business were very active, but then they began to die out quickly and they almost completely died out with the half-literary review *Druzina* ("The Family") in 1930. In the twenties they were still published the following journals: *Njiva* ("The Field"), 1919; *Mladika* ("The Springs"), published at Gorizia between 1920-1923, when it moved to Yugoslavia, and which has been published in Trieste since 1957; *Prosveta* ("The Education"), 1922; *Ja-*

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dranski almanah ("The Adriatic Almanach"), 1923-1930; *Nas colnic* ("Our Small Boat"), 1923-1928; *Nas glas* ("Our Voice"), 1925-1928; some journals intended for women and families; which were all short-lived.

In the 1930's the Italian Fascist regime introduced the so-called preventive censorship, which "confiscated most innocent, religious texts, saying that they denied the Italian origin of these parts and that they objected to the peaceful advancement of the Italian language among the foreign inhabitants" (Legisa). With such measures it was practically made impossible for any legal Slovenian publishing to exist. Regarding the increasing terror only few Slovenian cultural workers persisted in their native land, and even they were constantly either in confinement or imprisoned (Bevk, Budal, Feigl) and they were subject to permanent abuses and often even their lives were endangered (The short story published in this selection, "Flowers for the Hunch-back, "Roce za grbavca", by Boris Pahor, has the basis for its subject-matter one of the historically true sadistic murders of the Slovenian teacher, chorus-master, Lojze Bratuz, who was forced to drink lubricating oil. In most cases it was not only the question of liquidating a person, but torturing him: the victims had to suffer before they were killed in order to intimidate others.)

Many of the prominent Slovenian writers from that region therefore had to live in immigration on the native Slovenian territory: Ivan Pregelj, Igo Gruden, Alojz Gradnik, and others. Other, younger writers, also frequently ran away to Slovenia, as for example, in the twenties, Srečko Kosovel, who died very young, and who achieved European reputation, or in the thirties writer Ciril Kosmac.

Those, who remained, hid themselves either under pen-names or lived illegally. So, for example, the most prolific and most persistent among them. France Bevk, published his novel *Kaplan Martin Cedermak* ("The Chaplain Martin Cedermak") about nationally indestructible priest in the Venezia region, under a pseudonym Pavle Sedmak. Stanko Vuk, occasionally Boris Pahor, and some others, duplicated various literary works illegally (*Tihe besede*, "Quiet Words", 1935); *Malajda* (1939); *Lipa* ("The Lime-tree"), *Plamen* ("The Flame"), and others. Their companions were persecution and lawsuits, as well as death penalties.

Slovenian literature had to become completely illegal in 1941, when the Italian army, together with the Germans, attacked the Kingdom of Yugoslavia; Slovenian territory was divided among Hitler's Germany, Italy and Hungary: the Italian borders were moved even more towards the east, beyond Ljubljana. — But on all the territory settled by the Slovenians, there were formed the Slovenian partisan forces, which began to fight the occupators already in 1941, and which liberated rather wide regions. In the Slovenian Littoral, like elsewhere, people joined the partisan forces and their struggle also with the word: during the national liberation war simple folk poetry was thriving, many war poems and elegaic poems and sketches were then composed.

After the capitulation of Italy, in the autumn of 1943, the majority of this territory was in the Slovenian hands, Slovenian newspapers began to be printed, Slovenian schools started again; however, during the coming year and a half the areas along the more important communication lines and industrial objects were occupied by the

German army. In April and May 1945 the invaders were driven out of this region by the Slovenian army together with other Yugoslav units, and these forces met — partly on the Italian territory, the Allied forces, which advanced along the Apenninian peninsula towards the north. The interests of great powers were such that the Slovenian partisan forces had to withdraw from a large part of this territory, and the present frontier between Yugoslavia and Italy was definitely decided with a special London Memorandum in 1954. According to this agreement Trieste, with the closest surrounding, Gorizia with the western hinterland, Venezia Giulia and the belt between Gorizia and Trieste as well as a part of the Kanal valley, which were all settled mainly by the Slovenians, fell to Italy.

Literary creativity in this region is considered as western Slovenian (Primorska = Littoral) literature abroad; the authors from this region are included in the selection in this review.

The formation of the Slovenian cultural basis after 1945 in the Trieste region and in the Gorizia region was the result of various elements: of autochthonous cultural and literary workers and journalists, who were often orientated and enthusiastic supporters of the national liberation; there was a strong flow of the political, mainly right wing, Catholic immigration, which withdrew from the inner parts of Slovenia, and which chose Trieste as one of its main centres especially in the years immediately after the end of the Second World War, in 1945; there were the younger Slovenian generations of intellectuals, educated in Slovenian language and gradually appearing in this period. (With the London agreement the Slovenian minority in the Trieste region was provided a fair amount of protection, among other items, it is also the right to its own schooling in Slovenian language.)

The diversity is evident in provenience and ideology, and at first it expressed itself primarily in constant confrontation between the proYugoslav orientated publishing, mainly socialistic (Christian and Communist), and the Catholic right wing. This was the reason for the appearance of new reviews, newspapers and other publications again and again, and among the literary or partly literary ones, the following should be mentioned: *Razgledi* ('Views', 1946 to 1952), *Jadran* ('The Adriatic', 1947/48); *Stvarnost in svoboda* ('Reality and Freedom', 1950-1953), *Sidro* ('The Anchor', 1953), *Tokovi* ('Streams', 1957), *Mladika* ('The Sprig', since 1957), *Most* ('The Bridge' since 1964), *Zaliv* ('The Bay', since 1966), *Dan* ('The Day', since 1971), a publication with a literary supervision *Literarne vaje* ('Literary Exercises', since 1964); in addition to the above-mentioned reviews there are issued or were issued several journals intended for children, religious journals, calendar anthologies, partly having the character of a literary almanach. Since 1946 there is the Slovenian radio stage centre, as a part of the Trieste radio programme, which includes a very diversified activity, and there is also an independent and permanent Slovenian National Theatre in Trieste.

Briefly, the literary activity is rather varied, vivid and of high quality, so that some of the writers raised themselves to the vicinity of the qualitative peak of the contemporary Slovenian literature.

The central personalities at this moment and in this region are, no doubt, the novelists and essayists Boris Pahor and Alojz Rebula, and the poet Karel Truhlay, in this connection one should also mention a writer of short stories Milan Lipovec and essayist Ales Lokar, who is a professor of economy at the university, as well as a number of younger lyrical poets, some of whom are included in this essay and in the present selection.

The first and the most eruptive writer, who appeared in this time was Boris Pahor (b. 1913, Trieste). His stories and essays are full of thematic notes about half-past Fascist terror performed upon the Slovenian population, which the writer has experienced himself since his early childhood, and in addition to this, he spent a long time in the most severe Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War. The ideas of his fiction express a strong resistance against curtailing of man's freedom, his concern with fate of the Slovenian national minority abroad; however, on the other hand, his works express numerous joyful and lyrically rich, almost childlike experiences of the world of our senses, such as colours, odours, objects, forms, voices. Occasional expressionistic gloom is again and again superseded by ecstatic joy of living and optimism, the belief in certainty of existence. Pahor himself once defined his attitude towards the world as the immanence, which is not interested in any kind of transcendental mysticism. In some of his short stories and novels (*Vila ob jezeru*, 'The Villa Along the Lake', 1955; *Onkraj pekla so ljudje*, 'There Are People Beyond the Hell', 1958; *Parnik trobi nji*, 'The Steamer's Horn Blows for Her' 1964), Boris Pahor counterpoised the dark terror of semi-historical totalitarian governments to love for woman and to love for the native land as euphoria of life. Against ideology he stressed spontaneous human sensuality and sensitiveness, against killing Pahor stressed overflowing desire for life. Historical, conflicting positions set into man's life deep and dramatic crises, which can be overcome, according to Pahor's views, with some primeval humanism, such as it may be found in every unspoilt individual. — In his stories therefore often appear vivid, plastic, mainly lyrically orientated texts with the theme of nature, on one side, and essayistic meditative texts, on the other. Because the subject-matter is mainly simple, dramatically uncomplicated, pertaining to novellas, in longer texts, novels, the texts are ramified and later more and more independent (*Skarabej v srcu* 'Skarabej in the Heart', 1970), especially in the review *Zaliv* ('The Bay'), which Pahor has been editing since its emergence, as well as in the collection of essays *Odisej ob jamboru* ('Odysseus at the Mast', 1969), where it becomes completely independent. — Pahor's most successful literary forms are then short story (novella) and essay writing. With his Mediterranean temperamental style and innovations in composition, which are often the consequence of the writer's extensive knowledge of different European streams, Pahor obviously refreshingly influenced the further Slovenian literary development, when the native Slovenian literature was more and more decisively removing from the forms of doctrinarian socialistic realism.

Unlike Pahor, another novelist, *Alojz Rebula* (b. 1924, Sempolaj near Trieste) is often totally plunged into spiritual transcendence. His creative inspiration is constantly moving from the earthly reality of the Karst region and farmer's population living the-

re to extremely spiritualized ontological and religious spheres. This dualism is clearly seen from his initial works, his short stories, which he began writing around 1948, and until today. Almost simultaneously, in 1948, he had his public debut as a novelist, with a lyrical, psalm-like allegory *Skrivnost severne stene* ('The Secret of the Northern Rock Wall'), and a realistically told short story "Mali John" ('Little John'). In the first work he puts allegorically covered questions about the meaning and justifiability of man's life, in the second the question about the national exposure of a Slovenian farmer in the western, Karstic edge of the Slovenian ethnical territory. These are also two basic subject-matters, which are continuously repeated and complemented in diverse forms and combinations of motifs. — The most successful literary synthesis of both can probably be observed in the novel *Senčni ples* ('The Shadowy Dance', 1960). The reflective message of this narrative shows that the writer was most uncertain about both basic questions: why do I live, why a Slovenian (The title!) The central character is unapealably chained with his fate in foreign and simultaneously in native historical development and environment of present civilization. There only seem to be two possible ways of life: either to succumb, to adapt oneself, to acknowledge to one's own intimate conviction foreign values, or to remain isolated, unadapted with one's own values, which he acknowledges and fosters. To adapt oneself would mean to deny the autochthonous spiritual existence, and not to adapt oneself it would mean an eternal, most probably sterile, isolated resistance. To make the void of the position complete the novel begins with the death of the protagonist's wife, the refuge cannot be found in eroticism either. He finds resort from the incessant spiritual and existential crises in his native Karst and in powerful philosophical speculations and investigations concerning the main questions about existence and cognition; all this is done in the light of smallness and exceptional historical fate of the Slovenian ethnical community. However, physical and spiritual efforts are broken at the impossibility of cognition of the world in which we live and just this fact changes all our efforts into pure shadowy ravings, into a shadowy dance. The meaning which is left is persistence in the framework of given possibilities. — This novel is one of the most significant achievements of the contemporary Slovenian fiction.

In his later works Rebula finds solution for such crises more and more frequently and decisively in the Catholic religion. His former blind alleys disappear one after another, the world is becoming less hopeless, more clear, man's nobility is supported by the tradition of ancient humanistic civilization (the novel, *V Sibilinem vetru*, 'In the Sibyl's Wind', 1968), the covered meanings of allegory as a literary form are again strengthened, as well as its opposite, the diary, clear and open registration of everyday life (*Gorje zelenemu drevesu*, 'Woe to the Green Tree', 1971) or an attempt to write popular, ideologically clear story from the half-past time, *Divji golob* ('The Wild Pigeon', 1973). His writing is distinguished by and exceptional and witty sensitiveness for open, acute problems, secondly, by a vivid, plastic confrontation of spiritual life and positions with everyday, simple life of farmers, thirdly, by exceptionally polished, refined linguistic expression. Like Pahor, Rebula did not attend Slovenian schools, he learnt the Slovenian language by himself and his constant attention to language and style is the result of his own learning.

The third Slovenian novelist from this generation is *Milan Lipovec* (b. 1912, Trieste) who is less prolific and whose is of a more popular nature. His novel *Ljudje ob cesti* ('People Along the Road', 1961) is written in a juicy language about farmers in the Trieste hinterland, full of humorous folk anecdotes and beautiful lyrical descriptions of countryside. Lipovec hardly knows essayistic excursions, therefore his narrative becomes much more mimetically direct. The passage selected here is part of a broadly planned historical tale with the subjectmatter from the Trieste hinterland (it is a story about the origin and creation of well-known frescoes in the Hrastovlje church near Koper).

In opposition to laymen, secondary school teachers Pahor and Rebula, and to the printer Lipovec, the priest *Karel Truhlar* (b. in 1912 near Gorica) is much less directly linked to the western part of the Slovenian territory with regard to his personal fate as well as to his poetry. By his father's ancestors he is of Czech origin, he studied in Ljubljana and he works as a well-known theologian in Rome. There are almost no traces of national problems in his poetry, the religious-philosophical motifs are predominant, then colourful expressions of countryside or towns, full of quietness and interspersed with the anticipation of being, eternity, word, and spirit, are also frequent in his poetry. Such lines recur in several of his collections, among which the most interesting is probably *V dnevih sumi ocean* ('In the Days the Ocean is Murmuring', 1969). There is nothing tragic, dramatic, in his verse; they are full of calmly experienced belief, stylistically precisely written, and of colourful world covered with patina of seriousness. His cultivated style and individual experience of his lyrical poetry are those qualities which place Truhlar's verse among the finest achievements of the Slovenian religious late-Expressionistic poetry.

Belonging to the same generation, but even more strange as regards his origin, although thorough his life course and literary fate a naturalized citizen of Trieste, is a lyrical poet *Vinko Belicic* (b. in 1913 at Crnomelj), in whose work ideologically polemical voices have long been echoed, and are heard even today. He was a political immigrant, and his reaction against the social order in Slovenia was noticed; however, his long stay in Trieste reconciled him with the new environment and with the Karstic background to such an intimate degree that a number of ideologically unburdened, sensitive lyrical poems (*Gmajna*, "The Common Wood", 1967) as well as stories, were recently created. In his predominantly metrically measured verse he offers to the reader impressions of the rocky Karstic world, mainly in pathetic moments of complete quietness, darkness or during a storm when the wind is blowing. The poet makes parallels between the countryside and the man's heart, fate, loneliness, attachments.

Finally, and viewed from the perspective of generations, the dramatist *Josip Tavcar* (b. 1920, Dutovlje) should be mentioned, whose cosmopolitan plays have been performed at the Slovenian National Theatre in Trieste and on the Trieste radio. The main subject-matter dealt with critically in his plays is the consumer society of the contemporary western civilization. As regards the form of his plays Tavcar is in many respects and adherent of Pirandello's experimental, now and the also allegorical poetic drama.

Among the younger generations, who mainly attended Slovenian schools in the

post-War conditions, there should be mentioned *Zora Tavcar-Rebula*, whose prose works reflect the "inner" problems of Slovenia, whereas her lyrical poems are much closer to the Mediterranean judiciousness. Further on, there should be distinguished at least three generation groups. The oldest group is primarily represented by a lyrical poet *Miroslav Kosuta* (b. 1936, Sv. Kriz near Trieste), who published two collections of poems *Razpoke* ('The Cracks', 1966) and several plays. For both of these collections the local Karstic or Trieste or littoral environment is one of the major characteristics. Kosuta has written on this basis a number of erotic and existential reflective poems, which like to come to a satiric ending or playfulness, especially in his second, a more accomplished collection (*Pesmi in zapiski*, 'Poems and Notes', 1969).

The second group is represented in this selection by *Marko Kravos* (b. 1943 in Italian confinement) with two collections of poems and *Irena Zerjal*, who also published two collections of short lyrical poems, expressing personal erotic, spiritual and existential crises. In Kravos's poems erotic and other joys are prevailing, and they are gathered into verses according to the tradition of folk song and in a humorous tone. The sunny Mediterranean landscape is often included in his lyrical poetry, whereas in his two cycles, dealing with exotic themes, dark existential visions appear rather exceptionally; they deal with the questions of death and suffering. — With the exception of Irena Zerjal, both the first and the second group of poets is characterized by and adherence to a naive, individual kind of humanism, which likes to announce many a joy of life in spite of all the shadows covering the world.

The third group, the youngest poets, is here represented by four names: *Aleksij Pregarc* (b. 1936), *Filip Fischer* (b. 1943), *Ace Mermolja* (b. 1951, Gorica) and *Marij Cuk* (b. 1952, Trieste). It seems that in the works of all three poets the tendency of non-ideological poetry, poetry as play, is being established. This tendency is not exactly extreme in its achievements or rather in its realization, because it is difficult to avoid being ideological in such surroundings and position when one must struggle for one's existence from one day to another. It is obvious that the minority, which is not very powerful either in economic or political sphere, can hardly swing any other kind of self-protective weapon than ideological moralism. Nevertheless, the youngest poets also show this kind of change: with Fischer it is on the level of intimate impression, which already avoids a logical sentence and prefers to enumerate very freely and associatively all kinds of things; with Mermolja, it is a principal rejection of ideological "hodgepodge", as it is represented by Fascism, old fairy tales or traditional lyrical poetry; with Marijo Cuk as a horrifying expressionistic vision without an expected leading function of personal expression. The actor and poet *Aleksij Pregarc* (b. 1936) writes his poems in a similar manner as the above-mentioned group of younger poets.

After all this that has been said about the western-Slovenian literature written abroad it can be stated that this literature shows the growth which is of higher or lower artistic quality, but which always shows a vital development of those literary structures, which can also be noticed in native Slovenian literature on the one side, and in Italian, on the other. Slovenian writers and essayists represent with their critical, informative and essayistic activity a significant mediator between two cultures, regardless

whether stylistic examples or cognitive messages are in question. In comparison with Slovenian literature written in Carinthia this literature is also somewhat more "normal", because the foreign social element is indeed slightly less aggressive, in spite of many pressures it is less extreme and provincially nationalistic as in Carinthia. Therefore the contemporary Slovenian writer in the west is less subjected to a trauma than in the north: in opposition to prevailing grotesque and social satire, which dominate literary creativity in Carinthia, the intimate lyrical poetry and philosophical essays appear in Slovenian literature written in the regions ruled by Italy. Both of the latter forms are in most cases within limits of those forms and values, which are outside the grotesque deformity, however, they are both most sensitive to social criticism and national existence**.

** Translated by *Mirko Jurak*