

# THE SLOVENE POLITICAL EMIGRATION 1945-50

John Corsellis

## INTRODUCTION

A Slovene writer recently commented, referring to the Slovene political emigration: "This is a sad part of our history. We can not bring to an end our civil war. Unfortunately it will continue for some time longer." The documentation of and analysis of what happened can contribute to the process of healing.

The author felt honoured to be invited to contribute to a *znanstvena revija* as authoritative as *Dve domovini*, but nervous because he is not a *znanstvenik*. It is unusual to start on a personal note, but he would otherwise be writing under false pretences. So he opens with his credentials.

I have been researching the Slovene political emigration 1945-50 for some years, and take the material for this paper mostly from a book I have written on the subject, for which I am still looking for the right publisher. Half a century ago I started accumulating what is by now a sizeable archive. This was when I began work with the 6,000 Slovene civilians on Vetrinjsko polje (Viktring field or plain) in May 1945, a few days before the shameful forcible repatriation by the British of 10-12,000 *domobranci* in the neighbouring field and their brutal massacre without trial by their fellow Slovenes. Although only 22 years old, I was already an experienced refugee relief worker and was serving with the FAU (Friends' Ambulance Unit), a Quaker NGO (nongovernmental organisation), under British Red Cross auspices. 18 months later I transferred to UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), the precursor of UNHCR.

At the time I preserved copies of all relevant reports, memoranda and correspondence and also the letter-diaries I was sending my mother for the period May 1945 to June 1947. 45 years later I started visiting the Slovene political emigration in the USA, Canada, Wales and Argentina, with encouragement from the University of Oxford Refugee Studies Programme and support from the Cadbury and Rowntree Trusts and a private trust in Cambridge and generous hospitality from the families of former refugees: scoured the excellent UN/UNRRA archives in New York: discovered and secured the translation into English<sup>1</sup> of an outstanding and unique refugee diary May 1945 - February 1949 (the Pernišek diary) and several specially invited memoirs from Argentina; and collected oral history from some forty other former refugees in the form of tape-recordings of structured interviews.

Paul Thompson, a leading authority, has written that Oral History "can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place . . . [It] can result not merely in a shift in focus, but also in the opening up of important new areas of inquiry . . . [oral historians] can even approach **from the inside** the history of immigrant groups – a kind of history which is certain to become more important in Britain, and is mainly documented only **from outside** as a social problem." (my emphasis)<sup>2</sup>

This paper explores how far oral history can "approach **from the inside** the history" of the Slovene postwar political emigration. It starts with a contemporary description of the cultural and social levels attained by the refugees in their camps in Austria, goes on to provide a detailed account from contemporary documents of the actual process of the major emigration to Argentina and ends, in subsequent instalments, with refugees' own accounts of their first weeks and years as emigrants. It also seeks to illustrate the range and richness of the archive and to demonstrate the contribution oral history can make.

Two valuable papers on one aspect of the Slovene political emigration, that of the refugee press, have already been published in the second issue of *Dve*

<sup>1</sup> I am deeply indebted to the sister of France Pernišek's son-in-law, Sister Agnes Žužek of the Medical Mission Sisters, for the translation. I have edited the text and am solely responsible for any errors.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 2 and 6-7.

*domovini*<sup>3</sup>. I was intrigued to find myself appearing, in an anecdote in the second paper (p. 335), anonymously as one of the "two British camp 'welfare officers"'; my actual words to Dr. France Blatnik, the editor of *Domači Glasovi*, were quoted, but I prefer the original German given by Blatnik, "Herr Doktor, bitte, halten Sie mich nicht fuer so dumm", to Dr. Vovko's Slovene translation, where the ironic "bitte" disappears. Interestingly enough, I did not mention this conversation when describing the excursion in my letter-diary, and only 45 years later discovered Blatnik's characteristic account of the story at his own expense.

## I. DESCRIPTION OF A REFUGEE CAMP IN AUSTRIA

At the end of June the 6,000 civilians were sent from the field at Viktring to better, long-term accommodation in Lienz and three other camps, where they lived until they emigrated three or more years later. A month later I described the quality of life they created for themselves there in a memorandum I hoped would persuade officialdom to adopt a less authoritarian and more refugee-centred approach to camp administration.<sup>4</sup>

This needs to be read in the context of the surrounding circumstances. The refugees had very recently been doubly traumatised: first the trauma of exile – loss of home, extended family, precious farmland and possessions, secure future, job, national identity, personal dignity and self-respect; and then two weeks later the much more devastating trauma of betrayal and cynical and cold-blooded deception, as they saw it, by the people they most admired and trusted and on whom they had pinned all their hopes for the future, followed by the massacres and often multiple bereavements, without even the consolation of possessing the bodies of the loved ones over whom to grieve.

Under such circumstances it was to be expected that the refugees would suffer from shock of a severity bordering on clinical depression, which normally leads to a

<sup>3</sup> Rozina Švent, "Tiski slovenskih beguncov v taboriščih v Avstriji in Italiji", *Dve domovini/Two Homelands*, 2-3, Ljubljana 1992, str. 67-88, and Andrej Vovko, "Slovenski begunci v Avstriji v luči časopisa *Domači glasovi*", ibid., pp. 333-340.

<sup>4</sup> Memorandum dated August 1945 in possession of the writer. It was also signed by my fellow FAU worker John Strachan, which explains the phrase "we suggest".

paralysis of the will and an inability to think or act coherently; or alternately that they would be overcome by an equally disabling bitterness and hatred towards those who had betrayed them. The opposite happened. They simply picked themselves up from the ground, dusted themselves down and got on with the business of living; and within three months had achieved a community life of such educational, social and cultural quality that theirs was recognised as the model camp of southern Austria, to which newly arrived UNRRA staff should be sent for orientation; and the children were so well looked after that more than one of them have identified that time as the happiest in their childhood.

What led to this extraordinary, almost miraculous, moral toughness and ability to recover and magnanimity? At least four factors can be identified:

- the intensity of the refugees' religious faith and the presence among them of many priests who acted in effect as experienced bereavement counsellors, and, by celebrating Mass continuously, among other things helped the bereaved to identify their sufferings with those of Christ;
- the refugees' robust and highly developed feeling of personal identity via national identity, expressed in a passionate attachment to their nationhood, language, literature, shared history and folksong;
- the presence of sufficient natural leaders among them, who responded spontaneously to the challenge to the group's survival and whose dignity, moderation, spiritual depth and determination to serve it unselfishly provided role models for all;
- the 550 children among them who constituted the future of the group and of each individual family, and who therefore had to be looked after, whatever happened.

It is in this context that one should read my memorandum of August 1945 to the British occupation authorities:

It is assumed the authorities will be making plans for the refugee camps during the next few months. We suggest the Slovene problem is substantially different from that of other groups, and a different policy should be adopted. Of the 6,000 one in six are townspeople and the remainder from the country; the majority of the townspeople are from Ljubljana. The people from the country form a cross-section of a normal rural community and all come from a small geographical area; the farmers are in the majority but there is the normal quota of mayors, teachers, priests and craftsmen. On the other hand

the townsfolk are mainly drawn from the intelligentsia and black-coated workers, with teachers, clerks and students strongly represented.

At Viktring under exceptionally difficult conditions the refugees ran the camp themselves with the minimum of equipment, and ran it well enough for its inmates to compare life there favourably with that at the camps to which they were later sent. Apart from having responsibility for the general administration of the camp and the collection and distribution of food, they registered all the inhabitants, prepared nominal rolls for their transfer to four separate camps and ran a secondary school for 140 students with a comprehensive curriculum in a neighbouring farm house.

The Slovenes at Lienz-administration: The Slovenes maintain their own office with a registration system with comprehensive details of every Slovene in the camp. They have a representative in each barrack to look after their interests, and this work is coordinated by a committee of five men, each responsible for four or five barracks.

Their general committee meets once a fortnight and consists of chairman<sup>5</sup> (a doctor who was formerly chairman of the Slovene Medical Association and vice-chairman of the Yugoslav Medical Association), secretary<sup>6</sup> and chairmen of the six sub-committees for registration and housing, food, education and recreation, labour and employment, welfare, and hygiene and health.

Education and Recreation: The kindergarten and elementary schools, at which attendance is compulsory, are staffed by qualified teachers. The secondary school, which provides a full classical and modern syllabus, has received warm praise from Mr. Baty<sup>7</sup>, Deputy Director of Education, Allied Commission. A domestic science school has recently been started to cater for the 150 girls who do not attend the secondary school, with a class on

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Valentin Meršol.

<sup>6</sup> France Pernišek: referred to by Andrej Vovko, "Slovenski begunci", page 334, as the one-time editor of the refugee journal *Domovina v taborišču*. The writer of the "refugee diary", now living in retirement in Buenos Aires.

<sup>7</sup> Colonel C. W. Baty.

agricultural subjects for youths. Adult education includes courses for English, French, Russian, Italian and German.

Sport and gymnastics for school classes and adults are organised by an ex-Olympic games athlete<sup>8</sup>. A choir of over 120 voices under the direction of a doctor of music<sup>9</sup> maintains a high standard in spite of a complete lack of musical supplies. The newspaper office produces a daily newspaper in Slovene and Russian as well as duplicating an elementary Slovene reader which is issued serially and much other material for the schools. A weekly children's newspaper and a cultural and educational review will shortly be produced.

Health: The Slovene doctors<sup>10</sup> have opened a child welfare clinic, at which detailed records are kept of every child in the camp. Every child receives a routine monthly inspection by the doctors. A comprehensive analysis and report was prepared after the completion of the first examination of all the children. A daily visit to every room in the camp is carried out from the clinic by a nurse or medical student, and the clinic also undertakes general hygiene propaganda.

Labour and General: The establishment of workshops has only been hindered by the lack of tools, but a carpentry shop and a forge have started and have been producing their own tools as far as possible. The enthusiasm for work is very great and there are few trades for which trained men cannot be found. In all fields the Slovenes have qualified and capable leaders. For instance the headmaster of the secondary school is Dr. Bajuk, who was for many years inspector of secondary schools and before he left Slovenia was director of the senior secondary school in Ljubljana. Also the head of the workshops is Mr. Brodnik, an architectural engineer who managed a building firm in Ljubljana which employed more than 100 men.

<sup>8</sup> Ivo Kermavner.

<sup>9</sup> Abs. glasb. akademije Silvan Mihelič. I was mistaken, he was not a doctor of music.

<sup>10</sup> Drs. Valentin Meršol and Franc Puc. Both emigrated to the USA with their respective families and eventually practised as doctors, Dr. Meršol as a physician and Dr. Puc as an anaesthetist.

The Slovenes have a high degree of social consciousness and form a closely-knit and cohesive community. They have shown a marked leaning towards and aptitude for democratic methods of administration. Their leaders work hard for those in need of their help and oppose any preferential treatment for themselves or their friends. The director of the secondary school, who could certainly have secured a room for his family if he had asked for one, lives in the most crowded barrack of the camp with several other families. Their interest in and close contact with the other Slovene camps in Austria is also remarkable. Their newspapers and educational sheets are sent to, and they willingly make available facilities to, other camps. Relations with the local Austrian authorities are excellent.

Conclusion: The administration of the Slovenes at Viktring and Lienz shows they have enough competent leaders and skilled workers and are a unified enough community to be able to run their camp by themselves. If they are in the future concentrated in a camp or camps in which they would be in a majority, the most satisfactory course would seem to be to attach one or more liaison officers in an advisory rather than directory capacity. This would contribute greatly to the preservation of that individual and communal self-respect which is usually the first casualty in the refugee camp.

I referred only briefly in my memorandum to the secondary school, better known as the SBG or *Slovenska begunska gimnazija*. Colonel C. W. Baty, the Deputy Controller of Education Branch of the Allied Commission for Austria, had subjected it two weeks earlier to a formal inspection. In his seven-page report he gave as his general conclusion that the school

was maintaining, under very great difficulties, the best traditions of European education and culture. In the circumstances the venture can fairly be called heroic, and deserves all possible recognition and support.

The school's Abitur or school-leaving examination was at once given recognition and a largely Slovene initiative resulted in the opening of a special refugee students' hostel in Graz where some hundreds of Slovene and other refugee students lived and attended the university, including many who had taken their Abitur at the SBG. It is noteworthy that the new Archbishop and Metropolitan of Ljubljana, Dr.

Franc Rode, and the Archbishop of Toronto, Dr. Alojzij Ambrozic, are both alumni of the SBG, the former emigrating as a youth with his family to Argentina, the latter to Canada.

A month after writing the memorandum, I recorded my experiences with the Slovenes, as compared to Italian, Russian and ethnic German refugees, in my letter-diary:

Their attraction mainly lies in their strong self-respect, the complete lack of any attempt to draw advantage out of any position of responsibility they may hold, the genuine devotion of their intelligentsia to the well-being of the whole community and their unquenchable readiness to help themselves however unpromising their equipment may be.

Four months later I compared them with the UNRRA team that had taken over the camp:

The frustrating thing is that there are plenty of honest and able men in the camp, often considerably more capable than the UNRRA personnel . . . Surprisingly pervasive in UNRRA is the idea that refugees are inferior beings that can be patronised or ordered about, while in many cases they are superior to UNRRA personnel in capability, intelligence, manners, civilisation and honesty and morality.

Much of what happened fifty years ago is directly relevant to the running of refugee camps today. WE can learn from what happened then in such fields as refugee self-government and empowerment and the importance that was attached to generous provision for education and training for all age groups and of encouraging the people themselves to organise a rich variety of leisure and cultural activities. These are some of the factors that helped the refugees of 1945 to "overcome the disturbing experience of flight from their homeland and defeat and to go about preserving the Slovene character of their refugee status in a planned manner" (Vovko, *op cit*, p. 340).

## II. EMIGRATION - THE FIRST PLANS

In December 1946 the camp at Lienz was closed and its inmates transferred to the less well-equipped one at Spittal where most of the other Slovenes had been living since July 1945. A month later France Pernišek, the 38 year old medical social worker who had been secretary of the National Council, later renamed Social Council, at Viktring and in Lienz and who kept "the refugee diary" already referred to, recorded:<sup>11</sup>

28th January, 1947. A tiny, tiny shining and warm ray of hope lit up the cold darkness today. Dr. Blatnik<sup>12</sup> has received a letter from the emigre Slovene priest in Argentina Rev. Janez Hladnik<sup>13</sup> dated the 14th January 1947. It's clear they're well informed about us and our difficult situation. More still. There are people in the world who want to help us. Not with words, but doing something practical to rescue us.

Here I interrupt the Pernišek diary to explain that the Slovene political emigration's search for a country that would accept them as settlers had started half a year earlier, when it became clear they could not remain in the long term in Italy and Austria. One of those most closely involved, first in Rome and later in Buenos Aires, was asked by the editors of *Koledar* (the political emigration's yearbook) to record what had happened, and his account appeared in its 1949 issue.<sup>14</sup>

Jože Košiček wrote that already by May 1946 the Slovene Central Refugee Committee in Rome had recognised that a return home was out of the question in the foreseeable future, and the 10,000 or more Slovenes in Italy, Austria and elsewhere, homeless and unable to earn a living, had to prepare themselves for the unavoidable

<sup>11</sup> F. Pernišek, "Odlomki iz dnevnika slovenskega begunca", *Duhovno Življenje*, Buenos Aires, January 1987, 11, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Salesian priest who taught Latin in the camp *gimnazija* and edited the camp newspaper, already mentioned in the introduction to this paper. He emigrated first to Rome and then to Paterson, New Jersey, USA.

<sup>13</sup> Monsignor Janez Hladnik, born 1902, priest 1927, emigrated to Argentina 1936 to assist the resident Slovene priest Jože Kastelic, whom he in due course succeeded.

<sup>14</sup> J. Košiček, "Kako smo prišli v Argentino", *Koledar Svobodne Slovenije 1949*, Buenos Aires, pp. 166-167.

urgency of emigration. Their problems were made worse because of the many families with numerous young children they had – over a thousand primary and middle school pupils – the high proportion of intelligentsia, their hundreds of university students and many parentless girls. They had comparatively few farm workers, general workers and craftsmen, the desirable categories when it came to emigration.

An early exercise in market research revealed that 78% of those questioned wanted to emigrate overseas. But where? The USA was the first preference, but almost everyone added that they wanted to go where the majority went. The Slovene Central Refugee Committee asked Dr. Krek<sup>15</sup> and Mr. Košiček to explore other possibilities, and they started approaching diplomatic representations and more prominent personalities in every country which permitted immigration at all.

As the USA's strict immigration laws meant there was no hope for the whole Slovene refugee community to settle there, they approached the British dominions, and the Primate-Archbishop of New Zealand interceded with his government on their behalf, but while its response was favourable nothing could be done because there was no way to pay the costs of transport. South Africa and Canada, when approached, were only interested in fit young workers, with a preference for skilled workers.

Krek and Košiček then approached all relevant countries of Latin America, the only part of the world where there was room and the Slovenes would be welcome. San Domingo, Venezuela, Columbia, Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay all opened their doors, but the problem was again that they could not promise any help with the costs of transport.

The next task was to make a comparative survey of conditions in the countries – climatic, health, economic, social, religious, etc. Books were studied and diplomats and business men consulted. The news soon reached Rome of President Peron's offer to receive 10,000 Slovene anti-communist refugees, and his instructions that their arrival should be made as easy as possible. So in the middle of November 1946 the Central Refugee Committee called on all those in Italy to enrol definitively,

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Miha Krek, born 1897, died 1969, politician, leading member of the SLS, Vice-President of the wartime Yugoslav Government in Exile, principal spokesman for the Slovene political emigration postwar.

and a massive majority opted for Argentina in spite of opposition from some English camp officials and from malcontents at home.

Argentina was now open, apart from the travel costs. The English stood coldly aloof. The Anglo-Yugoslav talks had led to a noticeable increase in the pressure put on the refugees in the camps, and the English camp commandants dismissed the plans for emigration as nonsense. Food became daily worse as the authorities hoped to force the refugees to return home.

We now return to the Pernišek diary for 28 January 1947:

Father Hladnik informs us he's had an audience with the President of Argentina, General Peron, about the settlement of Slovene refugees in the country.

The President has promised to receive all the Slovene refugees. Dr. Krek in Rome will be our officially recognised representative and compile a list of those wishing to emigrate to Argentina. They have agricultural settlements in mind. In Argentina our people would find their second homeland. Only trained workers would get jobs in industry and the rest should work on the land. Peron has clipped the capitalists' wings and found a good solution to the needs of the workers and in this way disarmed the communists. It's true the communist party is now permitted but a brake has been put on its future.

Father Hladnik wrote: "Tell the people not to be discouraged. The diplomatic side will soon be sorted out and I hope transport across the ocean will then be solved and so we'll, God willing, be able to shake hands this year". Important and encouraging is the fact there's a concrete plan to move us out and, as is clear from the letter, this is Dr. Krek's work.

It is interesting to compare Pernišek's account with the actual wording of Father Hladnik's letter, preserved in a less than perfect English translation:<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in J. Corsellis, Notes on Slovene Refugees in Austria and Italy dated 15 April 1947, p. 8, in possession of the writer.

. . . The authorities here will help the refugees and want to establish colonies (settlements) of farmers on different places in the interior of the country. The settlements will not be formed only of one nationality, but mixed. Among the strangers will be always a quarter of Spanish origin to prevent that fifth columns would be established as was done by the Germans in Brazil and Argentina.

Argentina is regarding the economic situation the most solid South American state, where communism now has the least possibility to come to the surface. Capitalism however is now in the forceps, because the President Peron has introduced already many things for the protection of workers, and perhaps is Argentina in this regard the country showing good example to other countries. Mr. Peron was able enough to take the communists' arms out of the hands and use it against them. Now their party is (legal) admitted, it is true, but their future is checked.

To say it in short my advice is, recommend the people to decide to emigrate to Argentina. They will find here their second country. If the conditions change they can return home. They must be aware that only specialists will get professional work, all others have to be prepared to work as farmers, fruit growers, beekeepers, gardeners etc . . . or in other now unknown fields of the economy.

Košiček had by now arrived in Buenos Aires from Rome "to help with the simplification of the travel formalities, survey the situation and report back". He became Father Hladnik's assistant and wrote to Austria on the 11th February 1947:<sup>17</sup>

Rev. Janez Hladnik received your letter today. I am answering you as his assistant. I shall mix his answer with my own observations and advice, so far as I can give them now as a "gringo".

1. The Argentinean government issued in principle permission for the settlement of 10,000 Slovenes in Argentina. We owe this to Mr. Hladnik who has excellent connections with the men of the government and with the church

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pages 7-8.

authorities. Some days ago special permission was issued to 500 refugees in Italy to emigrate at once and as soon as further lists arrive others will also receive permission.

2. The Slovene Social Committee in Rome is exclusively authorized by the government of this country to propose Slovene emigrants to the consulate. Immigration is impossible without the support of the Committee.

3. The International Welfare Organization, where the American Catholics and the Vatican are especially collaborating, has enough means at their disposal to transport the refugees over the ocean, for the present only to South America. The representative of this organization, Msgr. O'Gradi, is now at Buenos Aires. We already had some discussions with him. He assures us – and especially us – of all help.

4. Argentina is a very rich country. The climate is hot but not insupportable. The fertility of the soil is three times better than in the Banat [the richest agricultural area of the former Yugoslavia]. Everything can be sold, anyone who works hard cannot starve. The government is looking for settlers. Do not worry about payment of the assigned land. If somebody should want to return home he will be able to do so and will be repaid for his investments and work; people who paid 10,000 pesos ten years ago for the land assigned by the state can sell it for 40,000 pesos today. No manure is needed. The farmers here sleep for some hours after lunch. You cannot imagine how easy the work is here. Certainly the first months will be bad as it will be necessary to plough fresh land. I am only afraid that the refugees will not want to return home if the possibility should come. I regret very much there are no indications for return at the moment.

5. The great difficulties you are having with post and connections with Rome are known to me, so it is right that you should yourselves prepare everything necessary for emigration. Prepare lists of people who are unconditionally determined to go over the ocean. Hundreds and hundreds together! Do not forget to put among the first persons those who are in direct danger. It seems that the Allied authorities want first to solve the question of refugees in Italy, and then it will be your turn in Carinthia [Kärnten]. All the same it is all

right to have everything prepared for when this happens. Advise people who cannot make up their minds about emigration to return home as soon as possible. Anyone who thinks he will go only through purgatory if he returns home, may return. A special problem is the small number of bad people among the refugees, and you have to think well if you ought to take them with you when emigrating.

6. I am worried about the intelligentsia: there is no possibility that they would all find work in their professions. All kinds of intelligentsia are in abundance in Argentina. On the medical faculty at Buenos Aires there are for instance 5,000 students: rich farmers – and that means all of them – are pushing their children to different schools, and the country remains vacant. The intelligentsia must be prepared for manual work, the same the students. If somebody has some exams, he has to repeat them – in good Spanish. They look at the foreigner here with mistrust: they see in him either a scamp (there are many) or a man who is more diligent and capable than the general population in Argentina, being very commodious.

7. Argentina is a Christian country, at least according to their feelings although, because of the superficial instruction, morals and practical Christian life in many places are not very high. All evil – together with communism – was brought in the country by foreigners.

8. Prices are high, wages also. The peso has the value of the Swiss franc. For one American dollar one has to pay 4.10 pesos. There is no black market. Clothing is twice as expensive as in Italy, the same are typewriters, photo-apparatus etc. Anyone who brings something like that to Argentina can get good money. There is a great demand for workers, especially masons. There are today, for instance, about 2,500 advertisements for workers and less than 100 offers in the newspaper "La Prensa". There is a specially great demand for cooks, housemaids, seamstresses etc. and foreigners are welcome.

9. We are opening a small office here because the poor Mr. Hladnik, a saint and extremely unselfish soul, cannot do everything himself. Please ask your people to pray for him because we will all owe it probably only to him if in

our misery we get a modest home and a piece of bread in a corner of the world.

### III. EMIGRATION: BRITISH COMMENTS

Father Hladnik did not have his meeting with President Peron until November 1946, but negotiations were sufficiently advanced already by August of that year for me to mention them to a British Foreign Office official on a tour of inspection. Mr. M. F. (now Sir Michael) Cullis reported to Mr. Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, on the 26th August:<sup>18</sup>

... it was evident it was an extremely well-run camp, and one could not fail to be impressed by such features as the hospital wards and the school rooms. I was also encouraged by what one of the officers told me ... that negotiations were quite far advanced with one or two South American countries — where there are apparently already appreciable Slovene immigrant communities — for the settlement of several thousands of the Slovene DPs. These negotiations were being carried on through Dr. Krek of the Slovene Committee in Rome. I was promised further and more specific information on the subject if I wanted.

Cullis ended his 19-page report with a number of recommendations which included the following:<sup>19</sup>

First-hand experience resulted in any case in two clear impressions. One, that there is no single, straight-forward solution to the problem that can really be regarded as satisfactory. Secondly, that, whatever its political and economic aspects, the problem is essentially a human one, and demands a human solution. This latter fact has nevertheless political bearings. Thanks to the good treatment they have received at our hands, and the educative effect on them of British methods, these DPs form a potentially pro-British and pro-Western element.

<sup>18</sup> M. F. Cullis, Report on Visit to Displaced Persons Camps in British Zone of Austria, dated 26th August 1946, in possession of writer.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Quite apart from humanitarian considerations, which in this case seem to me to be strong, I venture to suggest that we should not readily abandon these people to their fate in return for hypothetical political advantages. For this reason, and because the Austrian Government, if it were left in sole charge, could hardly be trusted not to yield to outside pressure and hand the dissidents over to the claimant countries, we should continue – as we are authorised to do under the new Control Agreement, and as I believe we intend doing – to retain responsibility for all DPs in our Zone, so long as we are in Austria. ... For the majority of them, an ultimate home will have to be found elsewhere. . . .

I would only add one qualification. I believe that we ought to do what we can to keep these communities together, and should abandon the idea of dispersing them amongst an alien and probably unsympathetic population. This would apply whether they are moved abroad in large groups or small. It is one of the chief and most natural preoccupations of the DPs themselves, so far as one can gather, and I cannot see that their satisfactory re-settlement in countries far removed from those of their origin would be feasible on any other basis.

These recommendations correspond so closely to the Slovenes' priorities at the time that one has to speculate that the twenty minutes of intensive lobbying I carried out on the 5th August may have had some influence on British Government policy! I did not send the "further and more specific information" I had promised Mr. Cullis until the middle of April 1947. After a survey of the Slovenes' situation covering several pages I then wrote:<sup>20</sup>

. . . There remains the special Argentine scheme, details of which are given in letters received by a Slovene in Austria, copies of which are attached [the letters from Father Hladnik and Mr. Košiček already quoted]. . . . The letters are of considerable interest, although the information contained is incomplete. No mention is made of any advance of money to cover living costs for the first months until the farms become productive, nor is there any reference to the provision of temporary or permanent housing. Also the statement that the

<sup>20</sup> J. Corsellis, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

International Welfare Organisation has funds for the transport of 10,000 refugees to South America sounds too good to be true.

The letters however are written by two men with good reputations for responsibility and reliability. Mr. Košiček was a leading Slovene journalist before the war and was sent to survey the situation in Argentine by Dr. Krek, the virtual representative for emigration matters of the Slovene refugees. The Rev. Hladnik is a much respected Slovene priest who has worked for 15 years in the Argentine and has excellent connections with the government and church there.

Conclusion: . . . (The Slovenes') conduct in and out of DP camps during the past 21 months has shown clearly that if given the minimum of outside help they are more than capable and ready to help themselves, and that they would form excellent immigrants to any country offering them reasonable conditions of entry.

I sent copies of the memorandum to British officials in Klagenfurt and Geneva, to the International Refugee Organisation (IRO, UNRRA's successor), and to members of the British Parliament interested in refugee affairs, including Mr. Winston Churchill, then Leader of the Opposition.

#### IV. EMIGRATION: THE FLOW STARTS

A lot still needed to be done in Buenos Aires. After lengthy negotiations Košiček and Hladnik persuaded the Argentinean Immigration Office to issue bulk immigration permits and to authorise the Slovene Central Refugee Committee in Rome to prepare on its own responsibility lists of 500 individuals and submit them to the Argentinean Directorate of Immigration, which then certified them without further delay. But there remained three problems: how to obtain the necessary "stateless passports" and raise the money for fees and essential journeys and how the Argentinean consulate in Rome was going manage the gigantic task of visaing the passports.

Eventually the Central Refugee Committee was allowed in effect to carry out all the consular work itself, the Consul simply giving his final signature. The strict procedures governing the admission of invalids and the partially disabled and infants were also relaxed, and the Emigrants' Hotel in Buenos Aires, which was not originally available to the arriving Slovenes, was opened to them, proving of enormous value.

The first group for Argentina left Italy on the 6th June 1947, the policy being to clear the Italian camps before starting on those in Austria. On the 1st July Pernišek did indeed record that the flow from Austria was also beginning, but not yet to Argentina:<sup>21</sup>

Emigration across the ocean is starting gradually. Early this morning the first contingent for Venezuela, with some Slovenes among them, left from Spittal camp.

It was only in April 1948, nine months later, that Pernišek could report progress on Argentina:<sup>22</sup>

29th April. I went today with Father Cyril to the HQ of the IRO in Klagenfurt . . . The first question was if we were the people who kept on writing to the IRO: we answered yes, and she asked us not to. We both listened and said nothing. Then we asked her to speed up the procedures required so that we could move to Argentina as soon as possible, and she asked if we had money for the journey. When we said no, she said IRO didn't have any either. We then went on to strictly practical matters, such as preparing lists of all those wanting to go to Argentina: it was decided the best would be a card-index with exact details.

We then went to a pub with Mr. Janko Hafner who is an IRO employee, and talked over the practical issues in more detail. He told us that Orel<sup>23</sup> used to organise all its one-day outings for its members better than IRO does the emigration of thousands of DPs. In the camps they've crowds of clerks who are bored stiff, the same as at the HQ, but they're unable to produce reliable

<sup>21</sup> Pernišek, *op. cit.*, June 1987, p. 292.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, July/August 1948, pp. 357-358.

<sup>23</sup> Slovene youth organisation.

lists. He advised us to do it on our own and at our own expense, so that IRO would have more money left for emigration.

Four months later things started to move faster:<sup>24</sup>

3rd September. Miss Lieven<sup>25</sup> from IRO HQ in Klagenfurt arrived in the camp this morning and told us that this month some two hundred people will be transported to Argentina and all those who can't go anywhere else, like families with many children and intelligentsia, are on the priority list.

16th September. Today the Argentinean consul Sr. Jose Ramón Virasoro came to the camp from Vienna. He had a talk with the [Papal] Delegate Monsignor Jagodic<sup>26</sup> and promised he'd give emigration permits to all Slovenes, and specially to families with small children. He authorised Monsignor Jagodic to give certificates of relationship to people who didn't bring them with them but wanted to travel together with their relatives. From day to day our workload increases!

30th September. Today the first group of 101 people left the camp for Argentina quite suddenly. It was announced at midday they'd be departing at 3 am tomorrow. At 2 pm they were told they'd have to move at 5 pm today. Although they were more or less packed to go they were put out by such brainless plan-changing.<sup>27</sup>

4th October. I was called to the IRO office in Villach about a second transport to Argentina.

<sup>24</sup> Pernišek, op. cit. December 1988, pp. 604-606.

<sup>25</sup> Ms Dara Lieven, a Russian emigre from an aristocratic family who trained as a nurse at St. Thomas's Hospital, London and worked for some months at Lienz refugee camp as an UNRRA nurse and subsequently transferred to IRO. Now living in a Russian Orthodox religious community in the US.

<sup>26</sup> Monsignor Dr. Jože Jagodic (1899-1974). His memoirs, *Mojega življenja tek*, Celovec 1974, contain useful information on the post-war refugee camps in Austria and some attractive photographs.

<sup>27</sup> Pernišek, op. cit., October 1988, p. 484.

5th October. Busy all day writing health certificates and other data. Quite a few people who had registered to go changed their minds during the course of the day, so we had to make totally new lists.

12th October. Visit of the Argentinean Consul Mr. J. R. Virasora, accompanied by his wife and other officials. His wife was presented with two *Ribnica* wickerwork bouquets of flowers, one for herself and the other for Mrs. Perón. The Consul promised that she was certain to receive it in person. Today he signed 257 visas, which IRO has already paid for. A few families were turned down because of illness (TB).

17th October. The camp choir gave a lovely concert this evening and everyone was moved by it. They sang about twenty well-known songs which we'd often heard before, but today left us with really deep feelings, and the atmosphere was most pleasant. Everyone knew that this was the last performance at Spittal camp for many of the singers: the camp is visibly beginning to empty and members of the choir will be going in different directions. This gave an added dimension and quality to the occasion.

23rd October. Today 148 are off to Argentina, left-overs from the last transport. Mothers got couchettes which offered some chance of a rest and the others sat six to a compartment.

27th October. Everyone had a thorough medical examination and had to give a blood sample. When they took blood from Mr. Nace Jeriha the doctor looked at the sample bottle, turned it upside down, shook it, added a bit of white fluid, shook his head and told Nace: "Please go and get your son. Let him give his blood again for you. What we've here is mainly spirit". Nace grumbled, but proudly brought his son Lado who solved his father's problem. Now we're only waiting for another visit from the Argentinean Consul and then the long, long journey.

3rd November. We're getting the new list for the fourth Argentinean transport ready, containing 800 people. Then the camp will be practically empty. Medical examinations for the fourth transport, which means a lot of work.

5th November. We have our hands full distributing certificates for the Argentinean transport. Some people don't want to go on and have withdrawn hoping they'll get to the USA, and we have to cross off the list families with children with babies of less than six months. Children aged 2-3 have to go to St. Martin camp for a special medical examination.

20th November. The Consul is busy all day. He's not choosy where Slovenes are concerned, accepting even the handicapped. The only people he won't accept are single men over 45, but if they live with a family they can go to Argentina with them. He's particularly keen on children and families with lots of children. My family<sup>28</sup> had to wait a whole afternoon to be sorted out and for our kin relationship to be recognised: it wasn't. A special commission attached to the consulate decides such issues. We had to pay \$49 tax.

21st November. My family saw the Consul. Everything went fine and we were accepted immediately. He put us in the \$7 group, so we won't be entitled to stay in an Immigrants' Hotel. By the evening most of the able-bodied refugees had been accepted.

23rd November. I'm celebrating my own birthday in excellent spirits. How hard it was this time last year! Today I've an assured departure: there'll still be great difficulties to overcome one by one with patience, but the green light is shining and the road to a new future is already clear. With God's help we'll start a new life in our new homeland. The Consul says Argentina is a large and rich country with enough work and food for everyone; he's delighted with us and our lovely healthy families and many lovely healthy children who are not only our hope and joy but also the hope and joy of Argentina, a country ruled by a man with a great heart.

<sup>28</sup> Wife Antonia (died in Buenos Aires in 1991, aged 85), daughter Cirila (Žužek, with whom France Pernišek now lives in Buenos Aires, together with her lawyer husband and three children) aged 14 in 1949, and son France (now an architect in Buenos Aires with four children) then aged 9.

29th November. Today the rest of the last Argentine transport left. There was a Holy Mass for them at 6 and they left the camp at 3 pm, lorries taking them to Spittal station. The farewells were a lot easier than previously. Mr. Janez Lavrih is warning us that the Yugoslav communists are doing everything they can to hinder our emigration; they're thinking of kidnapping prominent leaders. OZNA<sup>29</sup> has a widespread network. I was repeatedly warned not to leave the camp on my own, especially in the direction of Lienz or Villach. The students are pushed to finish their studies before leaving for Argentina. In the camp it's easy to see that a large number of them have already left.<sup>30</sup>

## V. EMIGRATION: PREPARATIONS TO DEPART

25th December. A holy day. Everyone joyfully wished each other a happy Christmas. Next year we'll be celebrating it in our new homeland. We hope God will continue to bless us and we'll find a land of peace, the most important things being health and work. God was with us up till now, and will be in the future.

29th December. My wife and I were called to the store to receive the items of clothing, linen and footwear we were entitled to – a lot of good new things.

30th December. It snowed on and off the whole day, while we began putting our poor belongings into wooden boxes. I was again warned not to go into town on my own, but did go to buy some tools. At the ironmongers they'd none left as our people had bought them out. The owner said:

We'll miss you. You were industrious, hard-working, honest people. All the years you were around we had peace, no thefts or assaults, and you never pestered us: we felt relieved. You were ready to do any housework, and we could leave you alone in the house because you people are honest and not demanding in any way. On the other hand you were good customers and brought us profitable business. We're already feeling the pinch from

<sup>29</sup> Yugoslav secret police.

<sup>30</sup> Pernišek, op. cit., March/April 1989, pp. 170-174.

your departure, and in future we'll feel it even more. It seems that most of the Slovenes are leaving for Argentina. We wish you a safe journey: we're quite sure you'll all do well in the new world because you're industrious, capable, gifted, honest and very religious. The whole town and surrounding countryside are talking of nothing else but your departure, especially the farmers you helped so much.

We said a heartfelt goodbye and shook hands. We Slovenes can also say: "Goodbye, good people!"<sup>31</sup>

Saturday, 1st January 1949. A new year, on the threshold of a new life in the new world. We're leaving our wooden town where for four long hard years we've lived as second or third class citizens without even the most basic human rights. We were just numbers in the long, long list of displaced persons brought about by the second world war. We're leaving behind us terrible years, but we're still sorry to leave and I'm experiencing strange feelings I can't describe as I put our modest possessions into boxes. Something is gripping my soul, my throat and my heart, and no word comes from my mouth.

We're leaving the old world still in ruins. Our homeland is close, nearly within sight, just beyond the mountains, and I keep looking at them and remembering my mother, sister, nephews and other relatives and good friends there: with none could I shake hands and say goodbye. I haven't yet written to them that we're leaving for Argentina, I'll write on the journey. I'm rather restless hearing so many conflicting reports in the camp; I've nightmares of being persecuted and hunted like a wild animal. We're taking leave of co-dwellers in the camp, of friends and acquaintances, of our unforgettable, good Dr. Meršol<sup>32</sup>, of the parish priests and curates and of all the other good people still remaining.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., June 1989, pp. 301-302.

<sup>32</sup> Dr. Valentin Meršol, who courageously led the protest against the forcible repatriation ordered by the British of the 6,000 civilians at Vetrinje, and was refugee camp leader at Peggetz camp, Lienz. He emigrated with his wife and four children to Cleveland, Ohio, where he continued to practise as a doctor until retirement.

Sunday, 2nd January. This morning the people leaving for Argentina had a 6 am Mass. At 10 we handed in our heavy baggage. All day my heart feels heavy and I see the same is happening to others. People don't say much but look as if oppressed by something: the nearer the moment of departure, the heavier the weight on the heart. Even my wife and children are silent. At 2 we climb into the lorries, and leave the camp at 3. "God be with you: safe journey", is heard over and over again from people still remaining for some time in the camp. They wave their handkerchiefs, we dry our tears with ours. Goodbye, good people.

At the station we were put straightaway into comfortable second class carriages and left at 6. The train moved slowly and silently. Strange. We're leaving behind four years of anxiety, bitter disappointments and sad memories, yet the transition from refugee to free person isn't easy. It's quite incomprehensible, the feeling at this moment.

Escaping in a hurry on the 5th May 1945, we didn't cry when we left everything behind: home, possessions, loved parents, brothers and sisters, friends and acquaintances and the most treasured possession of all, our homeland. We didn't know if we'd be alive next day, and if alive where we'd spend the night, what we'd eat or where we were heading for. We simply departed into the totally unknown - and left as if going on a spring Mayday outing! Perhaps fear took the place of the sadness of parting, or a special grace was given us so that we didn't hesitate about what to do. I'm convinced it was a special grace.<sup>33</sup>

## VI. EMIGRATION: ON BOARD S. S. HOLBROOK

On Monday the 17th January the last major contingent of Slovene emigrants boarded the American military transport ship S. S. Holbrook and set sail for South America. Twelve days later Pernišek recorded the thoughts of one of the best informed among the refugees, who had been manager of a group of newspapers back home in Ljubljana and was his closest friend in the camps:

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., July 1989, pp. 347-348.

Friday, 28th January. The Equator. At 6 am we sail past the island of San Fernando, a high security prison for the most dangerous criminals. In the far distance I spot a small white boat heading for the island. Mr. Kremžar<sup>34</sup>, leaning over the rail by my side, explains it's a patrol boat. There's no way out of this "hell in paradise", escape is quite impossible. He adds: "Think how lucky we've been to escape from a similar hell and how we're now sailing free and in peace towards real, democratic freedom. Difficult years lie behind us. I shudder when I think of Ljubelj<sup>35</sup>, of Viktring and of the four years of fear and humiliation, of the way the UNRRA and IRO staff looked on us as inferior beings, lording it over us and ordering us about like some black slaves; years of fear and lack of the most basic necessities, of unrelenting persecution and bans which forced us to hide in the hills and mountains of the Tyrol and Carinthia, wandering there in every kind of weather, half-starved, frightened, exhausted, our only hope in God's providence, mercy and protection."<sup>36</sup>

## VII. EMIGRATION: ARRIVAL IN ARGENTINA

Friday, 4th February. The ship stopped at 8 this morning with Buenos Aires and our promised land, Argentina, six miles in front of us. The cleaning of the ship is in full swing. The outside was newly painted by the lads and young men during the voyage and what remains is to clean the spots that were fouled during the food poisoning.

We're waiting for medical and immigration check-ups. The officials came on board at 8 last night when the ship stopped briefly, and checked our documents, stamped them and took with them the duplicate copies. I was very pleasantly surprised when I received the Immigration Commission's living and ration cards for fourteen days for the Immigrants' Hotel. I feel

<sup>34</sup> Franc Kremžar edited the camp newspaper at Peggetz camp Lienz. He emigrated with his wife, her sister and his only surviving son and settled in Buenos Aires.

<sup>35</sup> The mountain tunnel through which the refugees escaped from Slovenia into Austria in early May 1945.

<sup>36</sup> Pernišek, op. cit., January 1990, pp. 22-24.

much relieved: it'll help us over the biggest initial difficulties. The officials told us that the police will issue us with personal identity cards at the Immigrants' Hotel, and these will entitle us to live without hindrance in Argentina and enjoy the same rights as any other Argentinean citizen.

The medical check was nothing special, as they only examined our eyes for trachoma. They found only one Slovene with it, a bachelor called Pekolj, who was refused permission to stay and will have to go back. There was no difficulty at all with the handicapped people, as all were accepted and they were very generous with them. I noticed this particularly with one Slovene, and if I hadn't seen it myself I wouldn't have believed it. He had a totally paralysed arm. We all had to lift up both arms, but the doctor himself grasped this man's arms, lifted them up and then let them drop. He didn't notice, or didn't want to notice, the paralysis, I don't know which. The pilot who will guide us into harbour came on board.

Saturday, 5th February. Arrival and disembarkation. The tugboats bring the ship into harbour and we wait to disembark. There are Slovenes on the pier waiting for us waving handkerchiefs. We start disembarking at 9, and go to the customs with our personal luggage. They open our poor bags and pass us, working fast. We go immediately to the Immigrants' Hotel to get a bed each and a place to stay, and then straight on for chest X-rays. They're searching for people with tuberculosis of the lungs and found a few, but the problem was solved somehow; they were allowed to stay.

I found the first meeting with those who came to Argentina before us rather depressing; they seemed to have nothing nice to say, only complaints that they can't find anywhere to live, they're quite desperate, they want to go back, etc., etc. Some women in particular were insufferable, and had an upsetting influence all round.

Well, here we are! This is the end of the life of a refugee wandering the world. We're starting a completely new chapter. Every beginning is difficult. Let's confront new difficulties with courage and strength. We're really and fully free, in a rich country, they're offering us work, prosperity can be seen

all around us. With God's help, if we persevere and don't demand too much, we'll succeed in organising a good life for ourselves.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Lack of space has prevented me from describing the differences and internal tensions which appeared within the refugee community once a regular life had established itself at Lienz. Franc Pernišek deplores them in his diary and Director Marko Bajuk<sup>38</sup> gives a vivid account of them in his memoirs.

The tensions were at their worst between the camps at Lienz and at Spittal, and reached their climax when Lienz was closed down and all its inmates were transferred to Spittal in the middle of winter. Spittal resented the better facilities achieved by Lienz, and the fact that Lienz was generally considered the educational and cultural centre of the Slovene political emigration in Austria, housing the refugees' most precious possession, the SBG (*Slovenska begunška gimnazija*) and publishing most of their daily, weekly and periodical publications. In addition Monsignor Škrbec, the senior refugee priest and elder statesman, lived in a village close to Lienz, and Monsignor Jagodić chose Lienz as the site of his office when he was appointed Papal Delegate with responsibility for all Catholic refugees, Slovene and others, in Austria.

The Spittalers also resented the airs the Lienzers, as they claimed, gave themselves and were jealous of Lienz's reputation as the model camp of the British Zone of Austria, so that when the Lienzers were moved to Spittal, some Spittalers decided that the time had come to settle old scores. It is important not to exaggerate the issue, but the contrast is still remarkable between the solidarity and disinterested and unselfish devotion to the common good displayed by the community while its survival was under threat, and the speed with which more selfish behaviour and antagonisms between different political tendencies and class interests emerged as soon as the pressure from outside the community diminished.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., February 1990, pp. 91-92.

<sup>38</sup> Unpublished manuscript memoir, a photocopy of which is held by the writer.

The same phenomenon occurred in Britain during and after World War II. Observers have commented on the solidarity and cheerfulness shown by all classes when subjected to the strains of continuous and severe air raids and wartime shortages and discomforts, only to revert to their less heroic characteristics when these pressures were removed.

In spite of this negative aspect, it is still right to emphasise the many positive aspects of the life the Slovene political emigration created for itself in the camps in Austria, and the important role this played in maintaining the morale of the group as well as its self-respect and consciousness of its national and cultural identity, all factors enabling the emigrant groups on arrival in Argentina, Canada, the USA and Britain to make successes of their new lives, many individuals doing so to a remarkable degree.

The achievement by the Slovene political emigration of their resettlement as a group, including their infants, aged and infirm, is an example of refugee self-empowerment so remarkable that it deserves to be recorded in detail. It is to be hoped that the numerically larger Croat, Ukrainian and Polish political emigrations will produce similar studies of their own experiences in this respect, while the documentation remains readily available.

#### *POVZETEK*

### ***SLOVENSKA POLITIČNA EMIGRACIJA 1945-50***

*John Corsellis*

*Korenine slovenske politične emigracije so bile travmatične in družba, ki se je razvila na takih temeljih v begunskih taboriščih v Avstriji, je bila še toliko bolj izredna. Članek opisuje eno od taborišč in v nadaljevanju skuša čim celoviteje opisati uspešne korake emigrantov v Italiji in Avstriji ter pozneje v Argentini, ki so jih storili za dosego svojih glavnih ciljev:*

1. vzdržati se čedalje močnejšega pritiska pristojnega telesa OZN, UNRRE (Uprave ZN za pomoč in obnovo) in britanskih vojaških oblasti, naj se vrnejo v domovino;

2. najti državo, ki bi jih bila pripravljena vse sprejeti kot imigrante;

3. najti vir precejšnjih sredstev, ki so jih potrebovali za financiranje svojega potovanja v državo gostiteljico;

4. najti telo, ki bi jim bilo pripravljeno izdati potne liste ali enakovredne dokumente.

Članek skuša zlasti opisati proces, kot je prizadel:

1. posamezno begunsko družino, in sicer z navedbami iz dnevnika 34-letnega socialnega delavca, ki so ga spremiljali žena in otroka v starosti 10 oziroma 5 let;

2. posameznike, ki jim je osrednji slovenski begunski odbor v Rimu zaupal nalogo, prepričati birokracijo, naj spremeni svoje postopke, da je bila taka oblika množičnega preseljevanja sploh omogočena.

Naselitev večine slovenske politične emigracije iz Avstrije in Italije v Argentini v strnjeni skupini, skupaj z otroki, ostarelimi in oslabelimi, je izreden primer begunske samouprave kljub močnemu začetnemu neodobravanju oblasti in si kot tako zaslужi celovito obravnavo.