

# MARIE PRISLAND – HER ROLE IN PRESERVING SLOVENIAN CULTURE AND TRADITION AMONG SLOVENIAN MIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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## ABSTRACT

### **Marie Prisland – her role in preserving Slovenian culture and tradition among Slovenian migrants in the United States**

Marie Prisland came to the United States in 1906 as a fifteen year old girl. In 1926 she founded *Slovenian Women's Union of America* and was its national president for twenty years. In 1929 she created a magazine *Zarja – The Dawn*, which became the official publication of the Women's Union and to which she contributed regularly. She was active in different Slovenian-American organizations and wrote for many newspapers and magazines in Slovenia and America throughout her life. She strived for the preservation of Slovenian culture and tradition but also for the progress and development of Slovenian communities. The text shows how strong was her determination to help Slovenian migrant women in the United States to obtain the position of authority and respect. As much as she wished to preserve the traditional gender roles, she believed that only a changed, respected Slovenian woman with authority could become a part of the history of Slovenians in the States and in the homeland.

**KEY WORDS:** women migrants, Slovenian culture and tradition, women's organization, transformations of gender roles

## IZVLEČEK

### **Marie Prisland – njena vloga pri ohranjanju slovenske kulture in tradicije med slovenskimi izseljenci v Združenih državah Amerike**

Marie Prisland se je v Združenih državah Amerike izkrcala leta 1906, ko je imela petnajst let. Leta 1926 je ustanovila prvo slovensko žensko organizacijo, Slovensko žensko zvezo, ki ji je predsedovala dvajset let. Leta 1929 je ustanovila revijo *Zarja – The Dawn*, ki je postala uradno glasilo Zveze in za katero je redno pisala do svoje smrti. Bila je dejavna v mnogih slovensko-ameriških organizacijah in redna sodelavka številnih časopisov in revij v Sloveniji in Ameriki. Zavzemala se je za ohranitev slovenske kulture in tradicije ter za napredek in razvoj slovenskih skupnosti. Besedilo pokaže, kako močna je bila njena odločenost, da pomaga slovenskim ženskam v Združenih državah, da si pridobijo položaj avtoritete in spoštovanja. Želela je ohraniti tradicionalne spolne vloge, a je hkrati verjela, da bo samo spremenjena, spoštovana slovenska ženska z avtoriteto lahko postala del zgodovine Slovencev v Združenih državah in v domovini.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** migrantke, slovenska kultura in tradicija, ženska organizacija, transformacije spolnih vlog

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## INTRODUCTION

Marie Prisland came to the United States in 1906 as a fifteen year old girl. She was a part of Slavic-speaking peoples from Central and Eastern Europe who formed “one of the largest and newest groups of immigrants at the turn of the century”.<sup>1</sup> She disembarked during the period from 1900 to 1924 when the initial enthusiasm over accepting immigrants was gradually decreasing. The optimism that there was enough land and work for everyone was replaced by the revelation that land was limited, that work was uncertain because of repeated economic crises, and that dreams of better life were in danger of never being fulfilled. New immigrants, mainly Jews, Italians, and Slavs presented the strongest embodiment of that danger. Although immigrants from the early immigration period, especially the Irish, did not experience enthusiastic reception, opposition and distrust to newcomers did not strengthen until the turn of the century. Causes for such a change were various. Among them was a strong concentration of capital in agriculture and in industry, which upset smaller farmers and entrepreneurs, and the economic crisis at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that broke the illusion of unlimited development.<sup>2</sup> In the time when fear of foreigners and their foreignness ruled in the USA the immigrants and their children wanted to Americanize as soon as possible. But regardless of how strongly the parents wanted their children to become Americans and thus acquire a reputable place in a wider society, to receive education and be given better pay and less strenuous jobs – there remained a strong desire to maintain traditional habits, festivities, religion, heritage and a strong determination to preserve strong ethnic communities. In this social context Marie Prisland has a special place in the history of Slovenian migration. I will present her creativity in combining the traditional ethnic values with modern American possibilities and show how this brought many achievements to Slovenian communities.

### I. THE ORGANIZATION

At the same time when becoming American was the most important goal of millions of newcomers, the traditional ethnic life thrived in Slovenian and other ethnic communities. Marie Prisland found it in Sheboygan, a tiny place far from big cities in Wisconsin, where she settled down.

When she arrived to Sheboygan she discovered already established organizations and in the first years of her stay more of them were established. The first fraternal organization “Ilirija” was founded in 1901, the youth fraternal organization “Nada” in 1905, the branch of fraternal organization SNPJ (*Slovenska narodna pod-*

<sup>1</sup> Donna R. Gabaccia, *Immigration and American Diversity, A Social and Cultural History*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002, p. 142.

<sup>2</sup> Maxine Schwartz Seller, *To Seek America, A History of Ethnic Life in the United States*, Jerome S. Ozer, Englewood, 1988, p. 194.

porne jednota) “Skala“ in 1909, the branch of fraternal organization KSKJ (*Kranjsko slovenska katoliška jednota*) in 1911. In a community of a few thousand Slovenian migrants, there were singing and theater groups, the brass orchestra, Slovenian groceries, butcher shops and pubs. In 1909 the community decided to build a church and establish a parish. Two years later it was finished and in 1913 the three new church bells arrived from Slovenia. They were made in Ljubljana and the church in tiny Sheboygan was the only one in the United States, which had the bells from the Old country. The community of modestly paid workers also raised money for the parish school, which opened in 1923, and a recreational center called “Zelena dolina”.<sup>3</sup> There were women’s societies in Sheboygan as well. *Oltarno društvo fare Sv. Cirila in Metoda*, established in 1913, was the first women’s society in the settlement and Marie Prisland was among the founders. A JSPZ branch “Ameriška Slovenka” was founded in 1917, SNPJ Sheboygan women’s branch in 1927<sup>4</sup> and a branch of the *Progressive Slovenian Women* in 1947.<sup>5</sup>

Prisland arrived to America by herself with only an invitation letter of her neighbors to come to Sheboygan. Her parents left her with her beloved grandmother when she was five years old and went to Brazil. They were part of a “Brazilian emigration fever”, which started in 1880 and lasted until the end of the century. Most of the emigrants were poor farmers from Kranjska and Primorska region and their migrants’ path led them, in Aleksej Kalc’s opinion, “trully through tough, in comparison with other emigrant destinations probably the toughest collective life ordeal”<sup>6</sup>. Prisland’s mother died of yellow fever a year after arrival to Brazil and her father remarried and never came back or took care of his daughter. Prisland’s motivation for emigrating to America was to earn enough money for the college tuition because she wanted to become a teacher. To understand her role as a carrier and organizer of preserving Slovenian culture and tradition among Slovenian migrants in the United States, this biographical detail proves to be very important. It shows her high educational aspirations, her wish for independence and strong national consciousness. At the time Prisland was fifteen, teaching was one of the few professional and educational possibilities women had in Slovenia. The ambition to become a teacher meant not only that a woman valued education, but that she also had strong national feelings. Young Prisland saw that in Slovenia women teachers worked not only as teachers of little children, but were in addition organizers of different educational activities for the adults, were eager contributors to newspapers and magazines, published books, established

<sup>3</sup> Jože Zavertnik, *Ameriški Slovenci, Pregled splošne zgodovine Združenih držav, slovenskega naseljevanja in naselbin in Slovenske narodne podporne jednote, SNPJ*, Chicago, 1925, pp. 531–533; Marie Prisland, »Zgodovina slovenske naselbine v Sheboyganu«, *Slovenski izseljenski koledar 1966*, Slovenska izseljenska matica, Ljubljana, 1925, pp. 182–190.

<sup>4</sup> SNPJ, one of the first and biggest fraternal organizations, decided to establish women's branches at the convention in December 1908. Zavertnik, cited work, p. 578.

<sup>5</sup> The *Progressive Slovenian Women* of America was established in Cleveland in 1934.

<sup>6</sup> Aleksej Kalc, “Brazilija je vabila”, *Izseljenec, življenjske zgodbe Slovencev po svetu* (katalog ob razstavi), Muzej novejšje zgodovine, Ljubljana, 2001, p. 59.

their own organizations and publications, were politically active and worked tirelessly in favour of Slovenian culture.<sup>7</sup> When Marie Priland set sail for America, she did it with great ambition, independent mind, educational aspirations and strong national feelings.

For the Slovenian community in Sheboygan, which welcomed her, John Bodnar's description of the first immigrants who arrived a hundred or more years ago is a relevant one. He says that they were nearly all uneducated and unqualified workers, yet "they were in a sense almost all craftsmen in their ability to creatively fashion culture and meaning to suit their daily social and psychological needs. Consider their use of the rich repository of song, dance, and folktales, which nearly all groups brought to American city. This body of lore and culture had been generated in traditional communities and served effectively as a device for rendering meaning and understanding in a world which was beyond the powers of ordinary people to direct."<sup>8</sup> Marie Priland's life-long activities are an extraordinary example of craftsmanship, or better to say craftswomanship, in the ability to creatively fashion culture and meaning. However, in her case both cultures and both traditions were included. She was able to create meaning to serve daily social and psychological needs of individuals and communities through creatively combining the traditional ethnic culture of the Old country and the modern civic culture of the New World. In a unique way, she followed the traditional ethnic habits and gender roles, while simultaneously enriching them with the civic virtues and political freedom. Marie Priland brought many achievements to the life of Slovenian communities.

The most notable one was the establishment of the first independent women's organization, *Slovenian Women's Union of America (SWUA)*. She presented the idea of women's organization in *Amerikanski Slovenec* in October 1926. She pointed out that other women immigrants, like Czech, Polish or Slovak women, are well organized and have their own newspapers. The reason Slovenian women didn't achieve that was due to lack of education and interest to organize. Her idea was to establish an organization which would unite them, make them visible and proud because it would demand from them the responsibility, education and determination. A goal of women's organization would be to acquaint and bring closer Slovenian women from various scattered communities. United, they would be able to work "in educational, national and religious spirit" to benefit themselves, as well as their families and their nation. The response to her article was favorable. From everywhere, women expressed their enthusiasm to "show their compatriots in the old homeland, that they are also aware of their Slovenian nationality, to get to know each other better and to be beneficial to themselves and their families".<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See also, Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik, *Šolstvo in učiteljica na Slovenskem*, Znanstveno in publicistično središče, Ljubljana, 1995, pp. 17–49.

<sup>8</sup> John Bodnar, cited work, p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> Marie Priland, "Zgodovina slovenske ženske zveze", *Slovenski izseljenski koledar 1965*, Slovenska izseljenska matica, Ljubljana, 1964, p. 210.

Corinne Leskovar, a life long member of SWUA, describes how Prisland got involved with the community life in Sheboygan and how she got the idea about a women's organization: "She joined numerous activities around her church and community that brought her in closer contact with the Slovenian organizations. The first time the world of fraternalism heard of Marie Prisland was in the early 1920's when she was elected to the office at the *American Slovenian Catholic Union, Kranjsko Slovenska Katoliška Jednota* and she became one of their National Vice-Presidents. She was the only woman in that position, among a large group of men. During this time, an organization of Catholic women was effectively organizing all over the United States and Marie attended one of their conventions as a delegate from her church. This, in effect, prompted her to write of this experience in the Slovenian newspapers and in one of her articles, written in the *Amerikanski Slovenec* newspaper, in October, 1926, she said, in part: 'How wonderful it was recently to attend a great women's organization which was convening in perfect order, without argument and without any kind of disorder, much different from men's organizations; to listen to prominent civic speakers and become proud of our station in life, as women, wives and mothers. I thought how we could do this, how this would be possible among us, Slovenian women in the United States, to do the same and organize ourselves for the good of the many. With energy and talent as we have, we could have an organization that would enrich our cultural life, educate us to advance ourselves and our many young women and make us proud to be a part of this new homeland we have selected for ourselves and our families.' Marie Prisland realized that this was also her own dream and so, in some later newspaper articles, she repeatedly wrote of the possibilities that she saw in America for unification of Slovenian women. Responses to these articles soon appeared. First four replies were written and published and then letters came in her mail from all over the country. It did not take long for Mrs. Prisland to find there were more motivated women like herself who, following her instructions, were willing to hold meetings and gatherings and to begin organizing."<sup>10</sup>

*Slovenian Women's Union of America* was founded in December 1926 in Chicago and Marie Prisland was its national president for twenty years. Sheboygan was and it remained the leading branch up to present times. The main objectives of the organization were: "To unite the Slovenian women living in America, to assist in their social, moral and intellectual education, to foster American and Slovenian ideals, to encourage participation in American civic affairs, to help members to become American citizens, and to arrange an adequate interment for its deceased members."<sup>11</sup>

In 1929 Prisland created a magazine *Zarja*, – *The Dawn*, which became the official publication of the Women's Union, a bond among the members all over the United States. Mary Lou Voelk, a SWUA member and a Heritage Director, described Prisland's writing career as follows: "From the first issue until her passing in 1979,

<sup>10</sup> Corinne Leskovar in a written contribution to this article, February 2007, pp. 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> Marie Prisland, *From Slovenia to America, Recollections and Collections, Slovenian Women's Union of America*, Chicago, 1978, p. 78. It was first published in 1968.

Marie Prisland was the chief contributor. In her column entitled, "Oh, Ta Svet," she presented topics of interest to women readers. She encouraged them in the ideals stated by *Slovenska Ženska Zveza v Ameriki*, inspired them to grow membership and promoted thoughtful reading matter from other contributors. She encouraged every branch to send in news and announcements. Her own columns were thought-provoking and sometimes, entertaining. A well-remembered example is the character she created and named "Urna Nežika", a peculiar sort of lady whose behavior and written dialogue precipitated all sorts of situations, usually resolved with complex slang language and humor. The readership could recognize Nežika as she was always present at SWUA events, portrayed wearing fancy hats, flowered dresses, and carrying a large bag and a parasol. Occasionally, Nežika's marching in a drill team, in a bowling alley, or traveling around the world, found their way in Prisland's English language column called, "Capsules." Needless to say, "Oh, Ta Svet" and "Capsules" were a popular reading matter. When Prisland was the president she did write editorials. For many years the magazine was all in Slovenian. It never ceases to amaze me of the vision this woman possessed. Most of all, her heart burned with love for the Slovenian heritage. From that love was born vision and passion. Those immigrants who left Slovenia knew they would never see their homeland again, but they lived in their neighborhoods and joined the SWUA."<sup>12</sup>

On the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Zarja*, Prisland wrote an article for *Slovenski izseljenski koledar* to which she contributed regularly. Prisland mentioned that *Zarja* always "advocated women's rights and encouraged members to fulfill their obligations as mothers, housewives, proud Slovenians and loyal American citizens".<sup>13</sup> To the Slovenian readership she pointed out that *Zarja's* intention was to present everything that was good among the Slovenians in America and to call attention to good work, dedication and contribution of the members of SWUA to a common building of "American Slovenia". This self-perception is meaningful for the researchers of Slovenian migrants' experiences and the social construction of migrants' identities. It shows how Prisland and other migrants saw themselves as a part of the nation, which was on the other side of the Atlantic. Since the point of view could define what we see, it is of crucial importance to include migrants' perception of their constructed identity, belonging and loyalty in any migration study, especially if it is done from the perspective of a so-called "sending country". Of course, one has to understand that all migrants didn't share these feelings or didn't want to participate in ethnic activities. What I would like to point out is heterogeneity of the ethnic community and the differences among them, even when migrants did want to participate in all aspects of its life. In the text I put aside the significant topic of the schism in Slovenian communities in the United States because of lack of space. Just to mention it briefly, it was caused by the ideological,

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<sup>12</sup> An e-mail interview with Mary Lou Voelk, January 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Marie Prisland, »Ob 30-letnici Zarje«, *Slovenski izseljenski koledar 1960*, Slovenska izseljenska matica, Ljubljana, 1960, p. 182.



**Picture 1:** *Marie Prisland's corner with her desk, typewriter and an oil painting of hers in the SWUA National Office and Heritage Museum in Joliet (photo by the author)*

political and religious differences among the migrants but also the regional origin of the migrants and the timing of migration. Joyce Gorshe Plemel described to me one example of a fragmentation of a Slovenian community. As a little girl in the 1920s she noticed that her Slovenian community in Cleveland was strictly divided into “the church people and the non-church people”. This was a legacy they brought from the Old country and could also be called “catholic and non-catholic” or “the blacks and the reds”, or »”he conservatives and the progressionists”. All cultural, artistic, fraternal and social organizations were structured around this schism. She told me that they lived separately “by streets, by a bridge” and even “didn’t marry each other”, and everything was double in the community.<sup>14</sup> On the left side of the political-ideological, as well as the actual bridge, there were choirs, theatre groups, fraternal organizations, newspapers and publishers, national homes and recreational centres - and the same were on the other side.

<sup>14</sup> The narrative by Joyce Gorshe Plemel, Cleveland, October 2002.

Within this complex structure we can place the Slovenian Women's Union on the side of the "church, catholic, conservative" and the other women's organization, the *Progressive Slovenian Women* on the other side. However, the majority of the population in Slovenian communities experienced life of connectedness and solidarity despite the ideological and political polarization. Within this dynamic ethnic structure the majority of migrants made individual decisions and cultural choices, forming the unique migration experience.

Slovenian Women's Union with its eighty years long activities and its membership of which some women were active in both women's organization, is a good example of that dynamic. Corinne Leskovar points out that "in 1928, the Slovenian Women's Union published a book and named it *Ameriška Slovenka*. This was the turning-point, a published book, edited by Frances Jazbec, with numerous writers, including Mrs. Prisland, submitting encouraging and uplifting articles on various subjects of interest to women and young girls and supporting unification of the Slovenian women in America."<sup>15</sup>

At the convention in 1939 the Youth section of the SWUA was established and in 1934 the Scholarship fund. *Slovenska ženska zveza* published Slovenian song book and a cook-book with "Old country recipes", called *Women's Glory – The Kitchen* and organized trips to Europe and Slovenia, the first one in 1938. Beside its educational and national character, the Union was established as a fraternal organization with a substantial insurance fund. *Zarja – The Dawn* still exists as does the *Slovenian Women's Union*.<sup>16</sup>

## II. THE BOOK

*From Slovenia – to America, The Recollections and Collections*, a book by Marie Prisland was given to me as a present at the 75th anniversary celebration of the *Slovenian Women's Union of America* in Joliet in 2001. In the Preface, the author writes, how "the history of Slovenian immigrants is rapidly being forgotten, most of the early settlers are gone and their children are seeing their traditional background absorbed into the American way of life. These 'recollections and collections' have been compiled with deepest respect for the early settlers who contributed their efforts and talents to the strength of America and its Slovenian communities. It is for their children and grandchildren that I have prepared this collection of Slovenian history so that they might have a small glimpse of the rough road traveled by their parents and grandparents to improve their own living standard and to give life to sons and daughters in a free and happy land. Although the contents of this volume required a year of preparations, the book relates only a small portion of the life of the American-Slovenians. I

<sup>15</sup> Corinne Leskovar in a written contribution to this article, February 2007, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> The *Progressive Slovenian Women* ceased to exist in 2005.

do hope that it will serve as an incentive to a future historian who will apply the necessary efforts to cover this subject more completely.”<sup>17</sup>

Judging by these words, one would think that there are not many autobiographical elements in this book. It includes chapters like: History of the Slavs, Slovenia – the Beautiful, American-Slovenians and Their Activities, Slovenian Pioneers and Other Notables, Notable Newcomers since World War II and Slovenian Communities. On the other hand, the author included a few autobiographical chapters among the others, like Impressions of America, A Dream, Memories of Our Old Stove. We read in the Impressions of America an interesting sociological interpretation of the impact that American concepts of gender and class equality, work ethics and democracy had on the European newcomers, including the author herself. About the women social status, she wrote: “The honor and the freedom which American women were enjoying was a marvel to me. This is not duplicated in any other country on the globe. A few married men, however, were of a different opinion. Used to European behavior, they thought that America was over-protecting the little woman. One complained: ‘In Europe a man could mishandle his wife and nobody bothered him, but here, if a man beats his wife a little and the neighbors hear her cry, they quickly call the police! The man is taken to jail for something he believed it was his right to do. Isn’t the wife his property? And is he not free to do with it what he thinks is right?’”<sup>18</sup>

Although the United States at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not an egalitarian society regarding the social status of women, the women immigrants were in a much better position than back in the Old country. There were more economic and social opportunities to improve their status and even for the very traditional Italian and Slavic women the American society offered possibilities. In a general study of ethnic history, *To Seek America*, where women’s roles were included for the first time, Maxine Seller mentions how wife beating declined when women discovered that abusive husbands could be reported to the police. In a unique conceptual insight into the connectedness of the private and public sphere, she adds at this point that many Slavic and Italian women became active in their ethnic communities. She points out how they “developed national organizations that published newspapers and magazines and pursued educational and charitable work within the ethnic community. Members of religious orders established and ran much needed schools, hospitals, and orphanages.”<sup>19</sup> Here, I have to stress two points. First, the Italian and Slavic women have a special place in Seller’s analysis since she differentiates these two groups from, for example, Arabic and Jewish women. She believes, that “the social philosophy of Roman Catholicism reinforced long established patterns of female subordination in the Italian and Slavic communities”.<sup>20</sup> But even under such circumstances, the values regarding gender roles in the dominant society had an impact on women’s self-perception and

<sup>17</sup> Marie Prisland, *From Slovenia to America*, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> Maxine Schwartz Seller, cited work, p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

encouraged their civic activities. She stresses that their activities were not “limited to their own communities. In Chicago, Slavic women helped organize a Woman’s Civic League to register voters and campaign against a corrupt city administration. Women in other cities engaged in similar activities.”<sup>21</sup>

The second point is the gap between the private and public sphere, which is used as one of the most common methodological approaches in the studies of gender roles. However, if we try to study gender roles in a society this division is more of an obstacle than a useful tool for understanding. The mentioned connection Seller made between the women’s civic activities outside home and their rebellion against abuses inside the home is a good example. It shows how the private and public sphere are intertwined even in the case where the private sphere is traditionally structured and protected from the influence of the dominant society by the closed ethnic immigrant community. It also shows that subjected women can use civic values and laws of the dominant society to empower themselves even if they maintain their traditional role at the same time. The life and work of Marie Prisland, a housewife and an activist, is a good example of both points mentioned above. Her story shows contradictions, ambiguities, complexities and dynamics of activities of life lived in the Slovenian ethnic community in the United States. For its presentation and evaluation it is not appropriate to use the methodological division between private and public sphere. In an overview of treatment of women in migration history Sydney Weinberg emphasizes that we get a very limited picture of women’s lives because they are seen only as workers and part of the families, as wives and mothers. She thinks that we have to extend our research to other perspectives, “to (1) the connections between work and home life, the domestic and public spheres; (2) women-centered activities performed in the context of household or neighborhood; and (3) women’s perceptions of their world – the satisfaction it could offer and the way they could achieve authority within their realm”.<sup>22</sup>

The last point is especially relevant in order to understand Marie Prisland’s vision. There are many open questions regarding her activities, like, how she was able to establish a women’s organization that combined traditional Slovenian values and American civil liberties; how she combined religious and civic values; how she intertwined the goal of maintaining traditional women’s roles with learning and exercising their political and human rights. However, the issue I find particularly meaningful is her strong determination to help Slovenian women in the United States achieve a position of authority and respect at home, in the community, in the Old country and in the new homeland. That is exactly what she wanted, a position of authority that could be gained through education, work, activities at home and in the community. As much as she wanted to preserve the traditional gender roles, she wanted to change them. She

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>22</sup> Sydney Stahl Weinberg, “The Treatment of Women in Immigration History: A Call for Change”, in D. Gabaccia (ed.), *Seeking Common Ground, Multidisciplinary Studies of Immigrant Women in the United States*, Praeger, Westport, London, 1992, p. 11.



**Picture 2:** *SWUA members in Collinwood branch, Cleveland*

expected that if only this changed, respected Slovenian woman with authority could become a part of the history of Slovenians in the States and in Slovenia.

There is a much shared opinion among the researchers that life in America was better for women, as Prisland also noted as a young immigrant. Among the autobiographical parts of her book we read about author's experience upon arrival in America, which deals with gender roles in the new country.

"A group of Slovenian immigrants, of which this writer was one, arrived in New York from that part of Austria, which presently is the territory of Yugoslavia. It was a beautiful morning in May 1906. After leaving the French ship *La Touraine*, we were transported to Ellis Island for landing and inspection. There we were 'sorted out' as to the country we came from and placed in a 'stall' with the letter 'A' above us ('A' was for Austria).

There were at least a hundred Slovenian immigrants. We separated ourselves, as was the custom at home – men on the right and women and children on the left. All of us were waiting to leave for all parts of the United States.

The day was warm and we were very thirsty. An English-speaking immigrant asked the near-by guard where we could get a drink of water. The guard withdrew and returned shortly with a pail of water, which he set before the group of women.

Some men stepped forward quickly to have a drink, but the guard pushed them back saying: "Ladies first!" When the women learned what the guard had said, they were dumbfounded, for in Slovenia, as in all Europe, women always were second to men. Someone dramatically explained it this way: 'First comes man, then a long time nothing, then comes the woman.'

Happy at the sudden turn of events, one elderly lady stepped forward, holding a dipper of water, and proposed this toast:

‘Živjo Amerika, kjer so ženske prve!’

(Long live America, where women are first!)”<sup>23</sup>

I would argue that her determination to help Slovenian women to get the position of authority and respect at home, in the community and the society originated in two life circumstances. I already mentioned the importance of her childhood wish to become a teacher, which brought her to America and equipped her with capacity to do remarkable things: establishing a women’s organization and a magazine, writing articles and books, editing books, being active in many organizations, advocating education and national responsibility. The other circumstance is the society Prisland immigrated to. The above quotation shows that American civic values concerning woman’s social status were a strong inspiration for young Prisland. As a worker in the shops, chair and beer factories of Sheboygan, she quickly realized that she would never be able to earn enough money for the teacher’s college tuition. But there she also learned something so meaningful that she included it in her book. It is one of the many examples of “the comparative nature of the migration experience” as Nancy Green puts it and describes it with the following words: “The immigrant represents the Other in the nation-state, but the new land is the referential Other for the newly-arrived. The migrant embodies an implicit comparison between past and present, between one world and another, between two languages, and two sets of cultural norms. The immigrant’s observations fall somewhere between the tourist’s hasty generalizations and the social scientist’s constructed comparisons.”<sup>24</sup> Prisland constructed comparisons regarding the gender equality and also the equality regarding the status of workers. She wrote: “We were amazed to see wealthy people working when there seemed to be no real necessity for their labor. Gradually, however, we realized that Americans worked not only to acquire wealth or livelihood but to improve their standards of living, for creative purposes, or for the pleasure of doing something worthwhile. We were told that common laborers occasionally invented devices, which were accepted by their employers for improvements on machines, which increased the laborer’s efficiency and the safety of their fellow-workers. It impressed us that practically no one seemed to be embarrassed to work and that workers all over America enjoyed dignity

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<sup>23</sup> Prisland, *From Slovenia to America*, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy L. Green, “The Comparative Method and Poststructural Structuralism: New Perspectives for Migration Studies”, in, Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen (ed.), *Migration, Migration History, History, Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, Peter Lang, Berlin-Wien, 1999, p. 57.

and respect.”<sup>25</sup> Prisland never got a professional certificate for the work she was doing all her life – educating people through writing, organizing and lecturing. However, the American society gave her the inspiration and possibility of pursuing it even when certain activities were not perceived as desirable in the Slovenian community. And, as I will show, she made it into history, which was one of the main objectives of the organization she founded.

It is easy to imagine that Slovenian immigrants are not often mentioned in the vast literature on American immigration history and that Slovenian women immigrants are paid even less attention. But a prominent scholar Maxine Seller, quoted the story about Prisland’s arrival to Ellis Island in the introduction to her influential book *Immigrant Women*. After the quotation she added: “For Prisland, who later founded the *Slovenian Women’s Union of America* and created a woman’s magazine, *The Dawn*, the American dream became reality. Not all immigrant women were so fortunate. For many, life in the United States was bitter and the slogan, “ladies first”, cruelly ironic. “Ladies” were first to be underpaid, unemployed, and abused”.<sup>26</sup> Marie Prisland knew a lot about this cruel irony and included some stories about the hardships of Slovenian women in her book. She quoted Albina Novak saying: “Those who pine for the ‘good old days’ never knew what they were or never remembered what life had in store for the poor immigrants who came to America in the early years of this century”.<sup>27</sup> The difficult life of Slovenian immigrant women was also the reason why Marie Prisland founded the *Slovenian Women Union of America*. We can only speculate if she might have wished to write an autobiographical book and if so, why she didn’t pursue this aim. Namely, the structure of this book is truly unconventional: it includes not only the history of Slovenians in America and of their homeland but also autobiographic texts. However, the book structure which always puzzled me, seemed to be of no concern to Donna Gabaccia. In bibliography on immigrant women in the United States she listed two books by Slovenian authors. Under the section of “Biography” we find Mary Molek’s *Immigrant Woman*, which is described as a fictionalized biography of her mother.<sup>28</sup> It is really interesting to see that Gabaccia listed Marie Prisland’s book in the section “Autobiography” with the following description: “Includes considerable information on community work and notable women, but also her autobiography”.<sup>29</sup> Donna Gabaccia also quoted Prisland’s anecdote from Ellis Island in her book *From the other side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S.A.*<sup>30</sup> Moreover, one of the autobiographical chapters, “Memories of our old wood stove” was included in

<sup>25</sup> Prisland, *From Slovenia to America*, pp. 52–53.

<sup>26</sup> Maxine S. Seller, *Immigrant Women*, State University of New York Press, 1994, p.2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, *From Slovenia to America*, p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Molek, *Immigrant Woman*, Dover, Delaware, 1976.

<sup>29</sup> Donna Gabaccia, *Immigrant Women in the United States: A Selectively Annotated Multi-Disciplinary Bibliography*, New York, Greenwood, 1989, p 243.

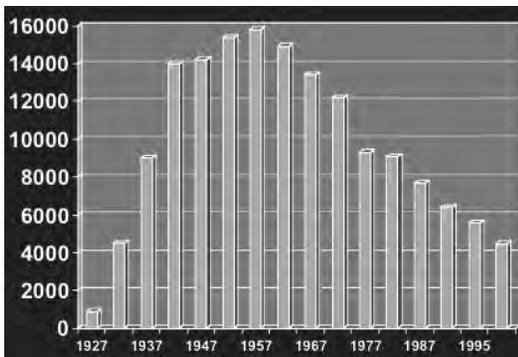
<sup>30</sup> Donna Gabaccia, *From the other side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S.A., 1820–1990*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994, p. 111.

the *Anthology of Slovenian American Literature*<sup>31</sup> and it appeared in the compilation, *The Ethnic American Woman: Problems, Protests, Lifestyles*.<sup>32</sup> Ethnic groups, which are represented in this compilation are numerous, and Prisland is labeled as “Slavic-American” together with Rose Mary Prosen. There is only one other author included in this group, namely Sonya Jason of Slovak descent (Russian-American and Polish-American are separated groups).<sup>33</sup>

The amount of literature on women’s migrant experience in the United States has been growing rapidly in the last twenty-five years. It is worth mentioning that the book by Marie Prisland left a modest but undoubtedly noticeable and indelible trace.

### III. THE LEGACY

When *Slovenian Women’s Union of America* was established eighty years ago, its main goal was to help Slovenian women living in America financially, to assist them in issues such as education, citizenship and participation in civic affairs, and provide moral and sisterhood support. In her book, Marie Prisland points out how difficult it was to establish such an organization because it was not welcomed in Slovenian communities, certainly not by men. For a person who valued ethnic community life like she did, it took a special courage. About the beginnings of the SWUA, she wrote: “This new organization was not very popular. Men eyed it as an intrusion into their domain and as something totally unnecessary. They maintained that a woman’s place was in the home, taking care of the husband, the children, and the boarders which every home had to augment the family income. Even the women had little faith in the new society until it started to grow and then expanded beyond expectations.”<sup>34</sup>



**Picture 3:** *The membership in Slovenian Women’s Union from 1927 to 2000 in thousands (reprinted by permission of the SWUA National Secretary)*

<sup>31</sup> Giles Edward Gobetz, Adele Donchenko (eds.), *Anthology of Slovenian American Literature*, Slovenian Research Center of America, Willoughby Hills, 1977, p.171.

<sup>32</sup> Edith Blicksilver (ed.), *The Ethnic American Woman: Problems, Protests, Lifestyle*, Kendal/Hunt Publishing Company, Dubuque, 1978, p. 279.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 446.

<sup>34</sup> Marie Prisland, *From Slovenia to America*, pp. 78–79.

As the graph above shows, the membership grew fast and steadily for three decades. It reached the highest number in the middle of 1950s, when a slow decline in membership was noted. The graph was presented to me at the SWUA National Convention in Duluth in 2003, together with additional information on the number of members in the years around 2000, which was around five thousand. It is difficult to say with certainty, but at that time it seemed that a decline in membership had stopped and the future of organization looked more optimistic. A lot has changed since the first days of the organization and we should observe changes in membership with consideration to social and political dynamic of a particular era. As I mentioned, Prisland sailed off from the Old country with educational ambitions and awareness that social action is necessary. She disembarked in the society where women's movement for political rights had been in its sixth decade of constant activities, which proved successful in 1919. She settled down in a community where she learned that not only Slovenians cherished their ethnic culture and tradition but other immigrants as well. I would like to stress the complexity of the situation in which Slavic migrants were regarded as less civilized and potentially dangerous for the American society. However, this did not frustrate young Prisland or obscure her insight into possibilities and choices that the same society was offering to immigrants. She was very much involved in Slovenian community and was fond of Slovenian culture and tradition, but she also acknowledged other Slavic women's organizations, publications and activities as something Slovenian women should have themselves. Her own immediate community, other ethnic communities, the dominant society and the homeland she left for good inspired her. We have to take into consideration this complex social context in order to fully grasp and understand her individual decisions, cultural choices and social experiences.

Moreover, the dynamic approach is needed to understand the changes in SWUA membership and in this sense the legacy of its founder. SWUA and its publication *Zarja* were established on the brink of a decade-long depression era, when solidarity and mutual help were of crucial importance. Up to the decade after the World War II, all objectives stated on the founding day were still relevant and attracted new members. Why did the number of members start decreasing at the end of 1950s? In 1940s, a period of economic and social prosperity in the American society began.

Slovenian migrants and their descendants were able to take part in this success due to the established life and citizenship they managed to obtain after decades of living in America. One of the impacts of prosperity was a better social position, which resulted in moving to better parts of the cities, mainly to the suburbs. This simple fact changed the ethnic life and communities in a drastic way, since Slovenians and their descendants moved out of the inner city and only occasionally visited old National homes and churches. This change affected all ethnic communities. Prosperity brought higher educational aspiration and migrants' descendants started to move according to job possibilities and offers, far away from new suburban homes. The decline in membership in SWUA and other ethnic organizations was also due to the

traditional concept and goals of respective organizations, which were not suitable for the younger, educated professionals. There were also other reasons, shortly defined as the long-term process of integration and assimilation. If I use Jan and Leo Lucassen words here, “we define assimilation as the state in which immigrants or their descendants do not regard themselves primarily as different from the native-born population and are no longer perceived as such”.<sup>35</sup> For Slovenian migrants and their descendants the turnaround was possible, because in a period of hundred years they had, like many other European ethnic immigrants, climbed from the status of “less civilized and culturally unsuitable” to the position of the American middle class of “the whites”.

However, it was not until the 1970s that attitude towards migrants and ethnicities in the United States changed dramatically. The period after 1970 is called the period of new ethnicity, as ethnicity becomes socially valued, even glorified. Various forms of expressing pride of belonging to a certain ethnic group emerge, such as ethnic parades of pride, festivals, picnics, performances. Reasons for the emergence of new ethnicity are varied and numerous. Among them, the civil rights movements that emphasised the rights of the black people, and the feminist movement that emphasised women’s rights, were the most important. The crucial social change was the awareness that people must have rights and be respected despite, and at the same time because, of their diversity. From the rights of black and women that perception expanded to ethnic groups of the old and the new immigrants. Due to emphasising the significance of individual and cultural differences, members of ethnic groups began to speak confidently about their origin, tradition, culture, history of their original homelands, and about the history of immigration to the USA.

The process of ethnic identity preservation was most intensively researched after the great ethnic revival. Researchers of migration and socialization processes tried to explain why anticipations of the optimistic progressionists that millions of immigrants would “Americanize” in American institutions of education, work and political system and become proud Americans, were not fully realized. Prior to that, there was an intense academic discussion on whether Americans would ever lose their ethnic identities, a discussion between the “assimilation” and “pluralistic” view on ethnicity. Advocates of the assimilation theory claimed that ethnicity is no longer significant for those generations that are remote from the first generation immigrants in terms of time span. Ethnic communities have disintegrated and with it the way of living in isolation, dwelling, working, marrying. When economic, political or religious reasons for ethnic solidarity no longer exist, then ethnic identity cannot endure or it has no reason for continued existence. On the other hand, advocates of the pluralistic perspective were pointing out that ethnic assimilation is not inevitable even in circumstances where at first sight it has no economic or political point, where people

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<sup>35</sup> Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen, Migration, “Migration History, History, Old Paradigms and New Perspectives”, in, Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen (ed.), *Migration, Migration History, History, Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, Peter Lang, Berlin-Wien, 1999, p. 23.



**Picture 4:** *The SWUA National Office and Heritage Museum in Joliet*

live in suburbs far away from traditional ethnic communities or in mixed marriages.<sup>36</sup> When ethnic revival emerged, such discussions had to withdraw before obvious facts and redirect their flow of thinking to concrete questions such as what the new ethnicity, as they named it, means at all and where it derives from.

An understanding was accepted that there exists symbolic identification<sup>37</sup> with personal ethnic origin, which is a matter of the individuals' decision and choice and is no longer a fundamental or decisive circumstance to which one was born. As an individual choice it is entirely intimate and has no influence on working, dwelling, educational, spare-time activities except when an individual decides differently.<sup>38</sup> Because of this intimate and individual characteristic of symbolic identification, a question emerges of what in particular it stands for. The answers are various, yet their common feature is that symbolic identification with ethnicity is a matter of choice and that it is changeable. What is interesting is that there is no conflict between fully assimilated American woman of Slovenian origin whose predecessor came from Slovenia a hundred years ago and her wish to participate in the *Slovenian Women's Union* activities or intimately feel Slovenian.

Corinne Leskovar, who has been a member of SWUA all her life and the main editor of *Zarja* from 1952 to 2006, summarized Prisland's work in these words: "Having writing and organizational skills, Marie Prisland was an ideal leader of women and generations of families and hundreds of well-motivated officers attest to her success in actively promoting this organization's ideals and in the publication of *Zarja – The Dawn*. In its eighty year long history there have been branches of the organization formed in fourteen of the United States, from coast to coast, with members inspired by her example and sense of purpose. She conscientiously directed the *Slovenian Women's Union of America*, declaring its belief in and commitment to Christian principles and the United States concepts of freedom and democracy, words printed in its Constitution. The preservation of these precepts and the heritage of their Slovenian ancestry is the stated mission of this organization still today."<sup>39</sup>

It would perhaps be an overstatement to call it only Prisland's legacy but nevertheless, the organization she founded undoubtedly realized all its objectives and still maintains the role, which she had envisioned on its founding day.

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<sup>36</sup> Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options, Choosing Identities in America*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, 1990, pp. 4–6.

<sup>37</sup> Herbert Gans's "symbolic ethnicity" as cited in Mary C. Waters, cited work, pp. 4–6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Corinne Leskovar in a written contribution for this article, p. 4.

POVZETEK

MARIE PRISLAND – NJENA VLOGA PRI OHRANJANJU SLOVENSKE  
KULTURE IN TRADICIJE MED SLOVENSKIMI IZSELJENCI V ZDRUŽENIH  
DRŽAVAH AMERIKE

Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik

*Predstavitev Marie Prisland je v besedilu strukturirana na dveh ravneh. Predstavljene so njene številne aktivnosti v slovenskih migrantskih skupnostih Združenih držav Amerike, od ustanovitve prve samostojne ženske organizacije, Slovenian Women's Union of America in glasila Zarja – The Dawn, do publicističnega, prosvetiteljskega in kulturnega udejstvovanja. Slovenska ženska zveza je bila ustanovljena leta 1926 kot povezovalka slovenskih žensk v Ameriki z namenom, da jim pomaga tako v prilagajanju novemu okolju, kot v ohranjanju njihove kulture in tradicije. Poleg tega je predstavljen socialni kontekst, v katerem je delovala Marie Prisland od prihoda v Združene države Amerike na začetku dvajsetega stoletja, ko je vladala politika asimilacije migrantov, do sedemdesetih let prejšnjega stoletja, ko je prevladala politika multikulturalizma in spoštovanja etničnega porekla migrantov. Tudi delovanje Slovenske ženske zveze je predstavljeno v dinamiki širšega družbenega in političnega dogajanja v Združenih državah Amerike in odnosa do priseljencev in njihove kulture. Besedilo predstavi še osebne motive delovanja Marie Prisland kot organizatorice in nosilke ohranjanja slovenske kulture in tradicije, ko poveže njene mladostne izobraževalne aspiracije in poklicne ambicije z vrednotami okolja, v katerega se je priselila, in možnostmi, ki jih je ameriška družba nudila priseljencem. Posebej so poudarjene možnosti za delovanje v okviru etničnih skupnosti, kjer se je Prislandova zgledovala tudi po drugih slovanskih skupnostih, in splošno družbeno vrednotenje ženskih političnih pravic, saj so državljanke ZDA dobile volilno pravico že leta 1919.*