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Bridges and Walls

Slovenian Multiethnic Literature
and Culture



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INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH TOPIC

*“Foreign, foreign, foreign!”
the hinges of the door
reproach me.*

*The dance of the curtains,
a dreadful fluttering,
and the slippery step*

*of shrieking crows
on the tin roof
ignite my thoughts,*

*peck at my essence.
A satanic cackle,
the winds of yellow winter;
feast above my head.¹*

Majority cultural output² in Slovenia along with that of emigrant and transborder communities outside of Slovenia and the cultural output of non-Slovenian minorities in Slovenia (constitutionally protected minorities, ‘new’ minorities, and immigrants)³ are defined in this book as co-cultures because they are linked by an essential factor: only taken together do they cohere to make up Slovenian national multi-culture in the contemporary sense of the word. The term co-culture is a new one in this context, coined because I could find no other suitable word that would emphasize or at least imply the key quality of coherence. And yet: do minorities and immigrants in Slovenia also hear the foreign squeaking of

1 Pavla Gruden, “Tuje”, *Ljubezen pod džakarando*, Ljubljana: Prešernova družba, 2002.

2 Here I refer to cultural activities.

3 See Translator’s Note.

the door hinges and the “satanic cackle” as the above-cited émigré poet, Pavla Gruden, put it? Do Slovenians who left Slovenia hear it when they return to visit the land of their birth? In an effort to answer these questions, this book will look at the relationship between, first, ethnic Slovenians who live within Slovenian borders and ethnic Slovenians who do not, both those who emigrated and those who were left outside of Slovenia as a result of historical borders changes. To a great degree, the latter two stem from the former and only together do they make up Slovenian national culture, replete with all its variety and contradiction, yet unquestionably Slovenian. Second, we will study the relationship between the Slovenian majority and non-Slovenian minorities in Slovenia – both constitutionally protected minorities (Roma, Italian, and Hungarian), ‘new’ minorities (mostly from what were once republics of the former Yugoslavia), and immigrants. All of these groups equally contribute their relative share to the body of Slovenian multi-culture just as all ethnic groups in the country helped create independent Slovenia.

These various groups are separated by the dividing lines of ethnicity, however imprecise; some of them are separated by the dividing lines of language, whereas Slovenian diaspora and transborder communities are separated from the majority Slovenian culture by the state border. Regardless of problematic and divergent internal relations, what unites these groups into a totality of national culture (unfortunately more in theory than in function) is the common cultural heritage, be it original or adopted, that these groups continuously update and expand with contemporary contributions.

We will not analyze in this book the cultural output of the Slovenian majority as more than eighty percent of the Slovenian population live, create, enjoy, and value it – even those who have only the most fleeting relationship to culture and those who do not have the necessary (material) conditions to actively enjoy cultural products. These aspects – the interests and material conditions of the users of culture – are also an integral part of the majority culture as they represent two of its withering organs: the nervous system that should harmonize the vital functioning of *all* parts of the cultural body, and the vascular system which should nourish the *entire* body. Among the most important roles these organs play is an integrative role that reaches both outside the body (the intercultural role on the European and global level) and inside the body (the

identification role). Both of these functions have thrived during the last two decades and yet are limited to an increasingly smaller circle of full-bodied cells that mostly belong to the national majority.

It should be noted that I have dedicated very little space in this book to the cultural activities of the Italian, Hungarian, and Roma minorities⁴ in Slovenia. The total membership of the three communities comprise less than one percent of the total population of Slovenia.⁵ The reason for this selective approach is the fact that these minority groups and their cultural activities have hitherto merited more research attention and state support than the ‘new’ minorities that are treated in this book. My focus will be first on the relationship of the majority culture to emigrant culture (and the extent of the presentation of Slovenian emigrant cultural and artistic production in Slovenia itself) and the relationship of the majority culture to minority culture, especially that produced by ‘new’ minorities from the republics of the former Yugoslavia. The latter comprise some ninety percent of all the residents of Slovenia who were born abroad and, from the standpoint of demographics, the first two generations of this group comprise one-seventh of the cultural space in Slovenia. The key aspects of successful integration of both emigrant and ‘new’ minority cultural activities and products in contemporary Slovenian culture and into the permanent corpus of the Slovenian national culture are their ongoing inclusion into the mainstream Slovenian cultural media, into the institutions of national culture, literary and art history, and into the national curriculum of all levels of education.

In the decades after the Second World War, Slovenian humanities and social sciences paid more attention to the Slovenian ethnic communities in the border regions of neighbouring countries and to the minority communities from these nations who lived within Slovenian borders than they did to Slovenian emigrant communities (those overseas and in

4 Certain administrative policies recognize the division of the Roma into autochthonous and immigrant communities, a decision that was strongly criticized by the European Commissioner for Human Rights (Council of Europe, Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights 2006: 3–4). Most Roma came to Slovenia after 1963, and the population of this community increased seventeen-fold between then and 2002. Nevertheless, the last census (2002) indicates that they still represented only 0.17% of the Slovenian population.

5 0.6 % according to stated ethnic affiliation, 0.8 % according to mother tongue (2002 Census).

more distant European countries). Likewise the cultural-artistic output of the former, especially that of the Slovenian ethnic communities in Austria and Italy, has been more integrated in recent years into the central Slovenian cultural programs and educational curriculum than that of the other categories. This becomes clear in a retrospective comparative analysis of the inclusion of literature from Slovenian emigrant and transborder communities into primary and secondary school curriculum for classes of Slovenian language and literature. It is worth noting in this regard that the cultural and artistic output of the constitutionally protected minorities in Slovenia have never been properly included in the curriculum of Slovenian primary schools which is a reflection of the delayed integration of their cultural-artistic production on the national level.

In recent times, the imbalance between the relationships of Slovenia to the Slovenian transborder and emigrant communities has gradually been corrected. This change was most evident after 1991 when the literature of the more or less amputated diaspora was accepted into the cultural media of Slovenia proper and convincingly reintegrated into the corpus of Slovenian national literature. Because literature has a central position in the cultural-artistic production of the Slovenian diaspora, we will discuss it more fully than other cultural activities. The ultimately successful, albeit belated, inclusion of this important part of diaspora culture into the wider cultural programs of Slovenia confirms that the reintegration of emigrant cultural legacy can be a relatively uncontroversial process once ideological and psychological barriers are overcome. However, because the path that led to integration in the key year of 1991 was such a thorny one, I will dedicate special attention to the entire process of introducing emigrant culture and literature into the cultural sphere of Slovenia proper.

Simply addressing the issue of whether the majority community accepts the Slovenian emigrant communities as an equal part of Slovenia's history and present (Drnovšek 1997: 2003) raises another question: are the immigrant and 'new' minority communities within Slovenia also accepted as an equal part of Slovenian reality – or do Slovenian media and academia, especially in recent years, focus intentionally or unintentionally on the more controversial aspects of these communities, paying less heed to their vital contributions not only to the economy but also to

cultural, literary, and other artistic activities, and to symbols of identity and everyday life.⁶

In Slovenia, there are currently at least 120 active literary artists who are members of 'new' minority communities. Characteristic of this group is internal division between its 'elite' – those whose work is published in Slovenian translation or who write in Slovenian and have open access to the main Slovenian literary magazines and publishing houses, and others, the far larger number, who are marginalized minority writers. While it is true that Slovenians have changed their mentality sufficiently to allow the inclusion of at least some Slovenian émigré writers into secondary school text books (Ambrož et al. 2003), the work of the immigrant and 'new' minority writers, even those who write in Slovenian, do not merit even a mention in them (at least not at the time this study was written). In sum, the situation in Slovenia, in terms of including immigrant and 'new' minority literary and other cultural-artistic production into the research, educational and cultural media content, lags significantly behind not only the general integration of minority literary and cultural achievements in large and traditionally multicultural countries such as the United States,⁷ Canada and Australia, but also in many European countries such as neighbouring Austria.⁸

The division between 'elite' and 'marginal' immigrant writers in Slovenia is very similar to the situation in other areas of the immigrants' and 'new' minorities' cultural and artistic endeavours. Until 2003, communities from the former Yugoslavia established and registered 62 cultural

6 Here I have in mind the following aspects of everyday life: internalization of patterns, habits, and values that people adopt on an unconscious level in the course of their lives. Elements taken from the immigrant communities and 'new' minorities in the everyday life of Slovenian ethnic majority (for example, the many linguistic borrowings from minority languages used in everyday Slovenian, the public interest for 'immigrant' sports such as football, and traditional ethnic foods, music, etc) are everywhere present but are not included in the definition of the common group identity.

7 Ethnic or minority literature is enjoying increased scholarly attention in the USA. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature* (Nelson 2005), one of several 'universal' encyclopedias of multi-ethnic American literature with five volumes comprising 2,692 pages, is probably the most extensive. Others generally capture one of the individually recognized groups in multi-ethnic American literature, such as African, Spanish, Jewish, or indigenous American literature.

8 See the fourth part of this book, Aspects of Literary Bilingualism.