Four Recent Slovene Migrant Novels in English

It has to be stressed from the outset that Slovene migrants in Australia have written and published mostly verse, first in Slovene and more recently also in English. As far as fiction is concerned, they have produced mainly short pieces in prose of various genres, again most frequently in the Slovene language, which were published in Slovene migrant press. Only recently, however, there have four book-length novel-like prose works appeared, written either by Slovene migrants (Ivan Kobal, Janko Majnik) or by Australians of non-Slovene descent (Victoria Zabukovec, Richard Flanagan), who are in some way connected with the Slovene migrant community in Australia. If there does exist such a literary (sub)genre as a migrant novel, then these works can be labelled as such. Very different in scope and method, they, however, in each case represent a valuable testimony to the rich Slovene migrant literary production in Australia and a contribution to the preservation of the historical memory of the Slovene community in Australia. The fourth novel, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, undoubtedly has the greatest artistic value from among the four. It was published in 1997, shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award in 1998, and was written by Richard Flanagan, an Australian writer of non-Slovene descent married to an Australian born of Slovene parents.

Ivan Kobal arrived to Australia in 1950 and tried his hand at various jobs; he wanted to become proficient in English as quickly as possible and eventually obtained a diploma in construction engineering. During 1954-1958 he, like so many other newly arrived migrants, worked on the big Australian project, the construction of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme. He described his experience in the very first novel written by a Slovene

migrant writer in Australia, *Men Who Built the Snowy*, subtitled *Men Without Women*. This documentary novel, which also contains partly fictionalized elements, has been published and republished several times, in Sydney (1982, 1984) and in 1993 in Gorica (Gorizia, today a town in Italy bordering with Slovenia with a strong Slovene minority). Kobal himself notes that it was a great encouragement for him to receive in 1975 the 1,000 AUD grant from the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts towards the writing of this novel. He contributed poems and especially prose writings to *SCOPP*, Australia's Multi-Lingual, Multi-Cultural Magazine, edited by Patricia and Kenneth Laird, which started to be published in 1977. The author feels that the second improved edition adequately presents a Slovene contribution to the documented history of modern Australia. Three Slovenes lost their lives while working on the project and the death of the youngest among them is described in the book (Kobal 1993: 21).

The book *Men Who Built the Snowy* is essentially a memoiristic work with a more pronounced documentary than a sheer literary value. It is divided into individual chapters representing anecdotical sections from the lives of migrants of various nationalities, simple workers who appear as pioneers, right after the Second World War, especially the Slovenes and the author himself, all of whom worked in the construction of rivers dams in the Snowy Mountains.

> The reader of this story should not expect to find extraordinary heroes fighting single-handed, decisive battles, but rather a few simple examples of practical pioneers performing their varied tasks. Without these men the Snowy Scheme would not have lived to capture the heart of a nation. To tell what is due about these men and to recognise their merit in a great national project, this book has been written for their sons to read (Introduction 11).

Each chapter deals with a single central event in the author's life and is written in the form of a short story. In the dedication Kobal points out that while working in the Snowy Mountains the migrant workers lived in harmony, which suceeded the disharmony of World War Two that many of them experienced prior to their migration to Australia. In the novel are equally important individuals working on the project, as well as the system of dams as such which is almost personified, and nonetheless the Australian landscape, beautiful but different from that migrants had been used to and difficult to survive in and to tame. Kobal describes the lives of ordinary workers of various nationalities, their everyday problems including the problem to cope without women, workers, who are in these dire straits forced to stick together and to rely on common sense and mateship. Mateship in particular helps them to forge a new Australian, adopted "national identity".

Kobal authorial voice is throughout the book strongly present and the literary figures are presented with admiration, resembling the first migrants/pioneers that came to America, who had had about the new land vague or even erroneous notions. Mirko Jurak stresses that just because of this, we, unfortunately, do not get to know these men well enough, i.e. as artistically drawn figures, although their past is described mostly in a direct reportage-like manner. Steven is the protagonist of the narrative. Kobal seems to have portrayed himself in him, although Steven soon appears an idealized image, one that combines the traits of various men working in the Snowy. The reader may find the narrative at times too optimistic and even naive and there is no irony, ambivalence and sarcasm in his book, which is generally characteristic of contemporary European literatures (Jurak 1988: 135). The documentary value of the book is indisputable which is also true of its significance within the Australian literary production in English. While the aesthetic literary component is definitely there at times, it is on the whole less evident.

In 1993 was published the lengthy novel *The Second Landing* by Victoria Zabukovec, who now works on her second book. It is a typical example of the combination of historical and semi-biographical fiction, which is based on the author's extensive research in actual historical documents. Since 1981 she had been working on the archives of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs in Adelaide and those regarding the first Australian immigration programme after World War Two, which are now deposited in the National Library of Australia. She included much of the material into the book, as well as the interviews she recorded with thirty-five individuals of almost all the nationalities from the Eastern part of Europe in which they recount their life stories and migration to Australia after the war. Victoria Zabukovec is not a Slovene by birth. She is Bulgarian, who came to Australia as as D.P. after the war, taught in various schools, worked as an interpreter and married a Slovene. Her book *The Second Landing* in many ways relies on her husband's migrant experience in Australia, which is why it can definitely be grouped together with the other three Slovene migrant authors discussed.

Victoria Zabukovec presents in the book fictionalized biographies of individuals from various countries in the Eastern part of Europe, from the Baltic countries, Poland, Czech and Slovak lands, Hungary, Bulgaria, and the former Yugoslavia. There are several Slovene names used (e.g. Janez, Stanko), though she seems to concentrate more on the Serbian and Croatian than the Slovene situation during World War Two. She is primarily interested in her writing in the way major historical events are reflected in everyday life situations during the war, in exile and later during the settlement in Australia. The author says in the introduction that instead of writing a historical chronicle, she decided to produce a historical novel: in doing so she left the historical facts intact, while the protagonists are freely fictionalized.

One of the protagonists, a Slovene called Janez, after the settlement in Australia works in the construction of the hydro-scheme in the Snowy Mountains: one could perhaps recognize in him certain traits of Ivan Kobal, the author of the book *Men Who Built the Snowy*, in which he myhthologized the D.P. builders on the project so important for the future and the development of modern Australia. These "voiceless" characters have thus gained their literary voice and can speak to new generations of Australians about a chapter of the past that would otherwise have remained unknown to them. In describing the historical events or deeds of a particular individual the author is never trying to pronouce an explicit comment, for she wants to be as objective as possible, not looking at an individual event through the eyes of a particular person involved in it. What results from the novel, however, is that the characters seem to be in a predetermined way caught up in fatal social events beyond their control they cannot avoid.

The novel is written in immaculate English and is full of real-life dialogues that give the narrative vivacity and immediacy. The book could be said to be a kind of "hybrid" literary form, a collage of historical data and fiction, a form therefore, which can be described as historical prose or a fictionalized biography of a composite migrant D.P. The end of the novel is particualrly interesting and also very typical. The former refugees revisit their native land for the first time after the war. After the initial enthusiasm of "Home", which changed a lot since their departure, they can hardly wait to go "home" to Australia. In the years of living in Australia they came to accept it as their new home:

> "It has been wonderful, but I am glad to be going home to Australia", said Anna and the others expressed similar sentiments.
> Rosemary looked at them. Here they were all partly European, partly Australian. At various moments in their

> lives, one or the other element of their heritage would come to the fore. They had experienced some of the most dramatic moments of their lives in the lands of their ancestors, but they *were all going home to Australia.* There was no doubt about that in their minds and hearts (408).

Janko Majnik served as a submariner in the Royal Yugoslav Navy before World War Two. During the war he served in the submarine "Nebojša", which, after the kingdom of Yugoslavia capitulated to the German forces in 1941, escaped to Crete and then to Alexandria in Egypt. He then served as a wireless officer on various British battleships (HMS Queen Elizabeth, HMS Canopus) and the submarine Rorqual. In 1942 he saw service with the British Army for the defence of Cairo. In 1949 he migrated to Australia and went to work for the Snowy Mountains Authority in New South Wales and later transferred to its Engineering Commission. From his early years in Australia Majnik has been dedicated to the Scouting movement which he served with distinction for over thirty years. For his service to the community he was awarded the honour of being named as "Anzac of the Year" in 1991 and the Scouting honour the Silver Acorn. Janko Majnik has published sketches and short prose texts in Slovene in the literary journal of the Slovene migrants in Australia, *Svobodni razgovori.* His diary in English *The Diary of the Submariner* was published in 1995 (republished in 1996 by Asgard Press) by the Naval Association of Australia celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War Two.

Janko Majnik's book is again a typical case of documentaristic, in his case autobiographical memoiristic fiction, based on his experience during the war. It describes the life of a person who is pushed into a certain historical situation and the diary serves him as a means to which he can confide his most private thoughts and feelings. The diary traces the lives and the destiny of the submarine "Nebojša" from March 1941, when it was

patrolling the waters of the Southern Adriatic based in the home harbour of Boka Kotorska to the April of 1947 via Crete and Alexandria, which gives it a strong sense of the graduation of tension concomitant with the spreading maelstrom of war. Individual diary entries represent the author's exctracts from his thoughts, historical facts, direct speech conversations with members of the crew, which makes the book very vivid and gives it a sense of firsthand experience: "I had a diary as a friend. In it I could pour daily the good or bad happenings" (53). The book ends with Majnik's decision "to sail to a land of mysteries and opportunities - the land of Australia. And, this decision has never, ever been regretted" (92).

Richard Flanagan (b. 1961) is an Australian writer who lives in Tasmania. His wife was born to Slovene parents, who had migrated to Australia after the Second World War. Much of their life story and also those of other migrants in Tasmania since the 1950s is reflected in Flanagan's most recent novel *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997), although he explicitly claims at the beginning that the characters and events in the book are "ficticious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental". Flanagan's first novel *Death of a River Guide* was much acclaimed. He recently directed a feature film based on *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, which opened the 1998 Berlin Festival and which has been in 1998 shown with success in cinemas all over Australia. Is it perhaps an exaggeration to say that with Flanagan the Slovene migrant experience entered the Australian "mainstream" literature and Australian consciousness, that it broke loose from within the borders of the Slovene ethnic group living in Australia? Definitely so. The novel, which was shorlisted for the prestigious Miles Franklin Literary Award, is a "migrant novel", and much more. It also is a subtle artistic depiction, a document of a certain historical period in Tasmanian past and of its people, a region not too frequently represented in the landscape of Australian

literature. And finally, the book is a domestic novel, testifying to a domestic migrant family tragedy and survival, which can be achieved through love and understanding. A touching and a highly successful book, a book to cry over and to learn from, a book that makes one think.

The plot of the novel revolves around the Buloh family, Bojan Buloh, the father, Marija Buloh, the mother, who walks out into a winter night into a blizzard never to return, leaving Sonja, her three-year-old daughter motherless to her father Bojan, a construction worker. The book is full of flash-backs and flash-forwards, moving back and forth in time in order to create an appropriate contrast of Sonja's life as a child in Tasmania in the fifties and sixties, and as a grown-up woman when she returns from Sydney, where she worked as a barmaid, to Tasmania some thirty - five years later. There the past begins to intrude forcefully on her, it is there that her drunkard father Bojan lives and there new life symbolically begins with the birth of her child bringing about also a reconciliation with her father. The Slovene lullaby is some sort of *leitmotif* in the novel, since it appears at the emotionally most intense moments and introduces Sonja's recollections of her mother Marija:

'Spancek, zaspancek
crn mozic
hodi po noci
nima nozic'...

'Lunica ziblje:
aja, aj, aj,
spancek se smeje
aja, aj, aj.

'Tiho se duri
okna odpro

vleze se v zibko
zatisne oko

'Lunica ziblje:
aja, aj, aj
spancek se smeje
aja, aj, aj.' (421-22)

When Sonja returns back to the sites of her childhood years, her whole life reels off quickly before her very eyes, her stays with the Picottis and the Heaneys, where her father had placed her since her mother's death, Sonja's quarrels with her father, his attachment to Jean whom Sonja liked but was not able to accept as a surogate mother. This caused her father to leave Jean and after many years, when she comes back to the place where Jean's house and orchard once was, "it had all vanished: Jean and Bojan... and the marvellous taste of it all, bitter and sweet and crunchy all together" (237):

> All that remained, she thought, was her. And him. But apart, they were nothing more than a home become a barn, an orchard ploughed under to become an empty paddock. The smell of a tree without blossom. the look of Jean's window without lace. The sound of one hand clapping" (236).

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