

Marta Skrbis: FIRST SLOVENIAN MIGRANT IN AUSTRALIA

In a country as culturally diverse as Australia a history of migration presents multiple layers of cultures and personal journeys. Australia has a relatively short history of white migration and many ethnic groups are trying to establish their 'early settler' status. The first few decades after Cook's 'discovery' of 'Terra Nullius', saw migration to the dry continent largely reserved for poor and starving British and the Irish.

Where do Slovenians fit into this mosaic of Anglo-Celtic underlay and many strata of the colourful spectrum of people migrating to Australia? While there was no shortage of Slovenian migrants after the Second World War, the earlier history of Slovenian migration to Australia is more enigmatic. Nevertheless, a clear distinction needs to be made between the 'visitors' and 'settlers' in the early Australian settlement period. Visitors were possibly Slovenian seamen working on trade ships which arrived in Botany Bay soon after the establishment of the new colony. They stopped and left as soon as the ship had delivered its goods or accomplished its mission. But settler immigrants came and stayed, they established themselves and started calling Australia home.

Further, we need to be reminded of some historical facts which make it more difficult to understand who the first Slovenian settler in Australia was: most of Slovenian territory belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire for most of the 700 years preceding 1918. The notion of Slovenian identity is by and large a product of the 19th century. While inside the Empire "Windish" discerned a Slovenian people, this term meant very little outside the multiethnic monarchy. To the outside world anyone from the Austro-Hungarian Empire would be likely to be identified as being Austrian or Hungarian.

Acknowledging the above, we can embark on the exploration of the earliest known Slovenian in Australia. In this regard, we need to mention two names: John Degotardi and Matthew Drolz. The identity of John Degotardi is a little unclear. He was a son of a printer from Graz, who worked in Ljubljana at the time his son was born. John Degotardi settled in Sydney in 1853 where he established himself as a successful printer. There is no evidence that – apart from the accident of his birth in Ljubljana – he was of Slovenian origin. In the absence of alternative facts, it is most likely that the most likely candidate for the first Slovenian settler in Australia was Matthew Drolz, known in his home country, and by his family, as Matevž Drolc (1858-1922).

Matevž Drolz was born in a Slovenian family in Petrovče near Celje. His father Joseph was a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army. According to the Cyclopaedia of Victoria (1909), Matevž became a blacksmith and later an apprentice engineer. He travelled and worked around Europe and North Africa, returned back home for some three years and in mid-1880 left for Croatia. In a meantime his brothers and sister all left their family home and moved away to other regions of what is now Slovenia: sister Ana married and moved to Muta in Koroška; brother Franc married and moved near Ormož, and son Joseph bought his family home in Slovenska Bistrica. The three Drolz's brothers and sister did not see each other together again until 35 years later in 1912 when Matevž reunited with his siblings for a visit. In the early 1880s Matevž travelled to Belgrade, where he worked on a construction of a palace for Prince, later King Milan, then to Athens, where he assisted in building fire-proof premises for banking brothers Albertini. He continued to the Holy Land and Egypt and intended to journey to the goldfields of San Francisco. In 1885 the ship he was travelling on stopped in Australia and while the intention was for Matevž to 'look around', he quickly found himself working as a repairman of the mining equipment for Johnstone and Co in Ballarat. There he met Mary Wilson, a young woman of Scottish descent and this was the end of his plans to continue on to San Francisco. They married and had three children. Matevž soon established his own engineering firm in Preston, now a suburb of Melbourne which, in early 1990s, was responsible for servicing of the Melbourne trams.

Upon his arrival to Australia, Matevž was known as an Austrian and he anglicised his name to Matthew Drolz. He was already multilingual, fluent in Slovenian, German and

Serbian/Croatian, and was likely to understand some other languages of his previous workplaces as well. He learnt English well and his Australian family never heard him say anything in Slovenian and he never shared his ancestral stories with his offspring. This is not surprising given the strong assimilation tendencies of Australian politics. Until the early 1990s Drolz's descendants in Australia considered their ancestor to be an exotic mix of Austrian and North African origin – a myth carried through generations.

After settling and doing well in Australia, Matthew became Matevž once more... In late 1912 or very early 1913 he started the return voyage to see his siblings. On his trip the WWI erupted and upon returning to Australia in 1914 he was imprisoned as an 'Austrian subject' despite the fact that his own son joined the ANZAC troops. He was eventually freed. Matevž died as Matthew Drolz, an Austrian from Stryria in 1922 and was buried in the Coburg cemetery, where his grave can still be found.

As fate had it, Matthew was not the last of the Drolz's clan with an adventurous spirit. In 1956, the grandson of Matthew's brother Joseph, Stanko Prosenak settled in Melbourne and in 1961 he was followed by his younger brother Walter. Some 35 years later I arrived, Joseph Drolz's great granddaughter. Truth be told, the story of 'strik Matevž' was always alive in our family but no contact had been made between the Slovenian family and Matthew Drolz's Australian family, until 1993 when my husband Zlatko Skrbis 'discovered' Matthew (Matevž) Drolz's grandson, John Matthew Drolz in Sydney. For a brief few meetings the two branches of the Drolz family met and were re-united.

So, as far as the known history is considered, and until something else comes to light, Matthew Drolz is likely to be the first migrant of Slovenian origin, settling in Australia in 1885.

Marta Skrbis