

## *Slovenians in Queensland*

Slovenia is a sovereign country situated in the heart of Europe. It occupies an area of little more than 20,000 sq km and shares borders with Austria, Italy, Croatia and Hungary. The present day national territory has been populated by Slovenians for the last 14 centuries: the first known state was the Duchy of Carantania, from 630 – 745. The people of Slovenia are speaking the Slovenian language and they are custodians of the ancient culture and old traditions. The two million Slovenians are blessed with a beautiful countryside reaching from the Adriatic Sea to the Alps and the Panonian Plains. From 1946 to 1991 Slovenia was one of the Republics of the former Yugoslavia. Following free elections held in 1991 Slovenia declared its independence. Ljubljana is the capital city of modern Slovenia.

The Slovenian community in South-East Queensland comprises 600 to 700 people. According to the census of 1996 there were 517 people of Slovenian birth for the whole Queensland, a figure which is underestimated because some Slovenians indicated for census purposes the former Yugoslavia as their country of birth. Although some Slovenians began to arrive in Queensland earlier last century they come here in substantial numbers only after World War II. Dr. Zlatko Skrbis who lectures at QUT once said: "Slovenians never made claim to have been on board of one of Captain Cook's ships."

Slovenians fled their country after the war because their country became part of a communist state. Many of them had to start a new life in Australia by undertaking manual labor, such as cutting cane. Slovenians often turned to building industries and prospered. Many of them became tradesmen, builders and subcontractors working as plumbers, carpenters, painters, bricklayers and tilers. Many homes in South East Queensland were constructed by Slovenian builders. Their diligence was rewarded with increasing prosperity, a fact which is also for the benefit of Australia and the Australians.

At home and when living abroad Slovenians place much importance on education. They have one of the highest per capita rates of book sales and illiteracy is almost unknown. The post-war migrants to Queensland were successful in small business and they and their offspring established various enterprises such as brake and clutch mechanical workshop, kitchen cabinet workshops, continental smallgoods, stock handling equipment, boutique apartments. They became self-employed butchers, plasterers, tailors, plumbers, restaurateurs, photographers, motel owners, computer technicians. There is also a Slovenian-owned dental laboratory. The second generation is entering the professions and office work, management and small business.

The early beginnings of Slovenian presence in Queensland were sporadic and largely insignificant in terms of numbers. They were emigrating on a large scale during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but Australia was not one of their popular destinations. It was not until after the Second World War that we can begin to speak about Slovenian communities in Australia. After a long and unsuccessful search to identify the first Slovenian to come to Australia, Dr. Zlatko Skrbis began to explore the validity of a story that runs in his family about a relative by the name of Drolz who lived in Australia around the turn of the century. In 1885 Drolz embarked on an epic journey to find gold and get rich during the Gold Rush in San Francisco. He never got there. After his ship arrived in Melbourne, a local lady caught his eye. All told, he spent the rest of his life in Australia yet the facts and stations of his Slovenian – Australian life appear to be blurred forever.

Few Slovenians arrived in Queensland prior to the Second World War. The first organized gathering of Slovenians took place in Brisbane 1952. BAFS Hall in George Street in the City was used for the first social Dances. In 1955 the Slovenian Australian Association Planinka was established with about 45 financial members and the same hall in George St. was regularly used for first 12 years.

Slovenians are largely Catholics and the church is an important part in their lives and social contacts. The first Slovenian Mass was celebrated in St Mary's church in South Brisbane by father Okorn in late 1954. Since then Slovenian Masses were celebrated by visiting priest from Sydney in the same St. Mary's church. We generally receive a visit of Slovenian priest 4 to 5 times a year. Only in last few years community center in Cornubia is used for Slovenian church celebration of Holy Mass. Following Slovenian Catholic tradition the MARIJA POMAGAJ shrine was erected at community center with the names engraved of the deceased members of the Slovenian community in Queensland. Remembrance prayers for the past members and our past relatives on All Soul day are traditionally said in November by large community participation.

Slovenians in Queensland have feeling of being a large family. In 1977 the community in Brisbane purchased a block of land at 145 Redland Bay Rd. Cornubia which became popularly known a "hribcek" – small hill. Volunteers build a Slovenian center on "hribcek" with a hall, kitchen and covered 'bocce' bowling area. A number of Slovenian Bishops and priest have visit the community in Brisbane and as community grew many more visit of popular singers, musicians, entertainers and political leaders have come to be with us. Functions, Meetings, Stage plays, Concerts and picnics are held at the Planinka center. In 1980 a school of Slovenian language was establish and run for a year. It was reopened in 1996 but again only for a year. **Slovenian Australian Association Planinka Inc.** is a non-profit organization which provides a friendly place of encounter for all Slovenians and their friends. You may come here for a chat, a social function, a sport event or cultural activities. Anica Cuderman is current president of S.A.A.Planinka Inc.

Other community organizations include the **Gold Coast Bocce Club 'Lipa' Inc.** at the Ashmore Community Sports Center. It was established in 1991 and serves primarily as a meeting point for the Slovenian Community of the Gold Coast. Joe Vohar is president of Lipa Inc.

There is also **Slovenian program on Community Radio 4 EB.** This one hour program in the Slovenian language is broadcast on Saturday from 6pm.

The **Slovenian National Council of Queensland** is linked with Australian Slovenian Conference and the World Slovenian Congress. It was founded in 1990 for the purpose of supporting the independence movement in Slovenia. Its president is Joe Vah who is also convenor of the 4 EB Slovenian radio group.

The most notable Slovenian in Queensland was **Robert Mejac**, an engineer, architect and painter who come to Australia in 1949. During the first few years of Australian residency he was an adviser to a government minister in Tasmania until he moved to Queensland. He invented a system of steel concrete molding which is still in use today. He also developed a new way to pre-stress concrete. This process was named and patented as MEJAC, LB-SB and is in international use. Robert Mejac who died in 1992 in Redcliffe aged 77 was also a formidable voluntary worker for the Slovenian community.

Slovenians in Queensland have been successful in many areas. **Slavko Pekol** or Jim Pekol as he is known to wider community is successful master builder and owner of a shopping center. He is former president of Slovenian Australian Association Planinka and respected Australian community leader. Early this year Australian Government expresses its gratitude to Jim Pekol for valued contribution toward assisting developing countries to redoes poverty and achieve sustainable development. Recognition signed by prime minister Mr. Howard and Minister for Foreign Affairs was given to Jim for many years of voluntary community work here in Australia and overseas.

Viktor Pahor and his son Frideric Pahor have received awards for their contribution to the building industry. Marko Pregelj became Apprentice of the year in 1984. Marjan Podobnik completed a law a law degree at the University of Queensland and is now a principal legal officer in Adelaide. University academics include Zlatko Skrbis, Sara Visocnik Mury and Rok Sosic who now heads a private computer firm.

Julie Majer who come to Brisbane from Mareeba has represented Australia at various international swimming events. At the World Cup of 1991 she won five gold medals and a silver medal. She won bronze at the Commonwealth Games in 1994. Second generation Slovenians have graduated in medicine, engineering, social work and other professional degree courses.

*Mirko Cuderman*