

Tracing the Slovenes from the Raba and Mura Region in the USA

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A travelogue by Tibor Horvat and Joël Gerber



New York City

After an 8 hour flight, we finally arrived at JFK Airport in the „capital of the world“, New York City. Shortly after having completed the compulsory immigration formalities at the American customs, we claimed our baggage. After having left the airport area we were already confronted with the first peculiarity: Just outside the airport building we came across a small room destined for smokers. We considered the idea of an outdoor construction for smokers pretty odd and we couldn't resist grinning quietly to ourselves. After this short break, we got on a shuttle bus, which took us to the hotel. Together with some tourists from Germany and the American west coast, we drove through *Brooklyn*, *Queens* and *Harlem (Manhattan)*, some of the boroughs of New York, and after some time we arrived at our destination: *Upper West Side* in *Manhattan*.

After having checked into our hotel, room we could have easily gone to sleep, since the flight and six-hour time difference were very tiring. However, we wanted our organisms to get used to the new time zone right from the very beginning. For this reason, we decided to have a bite to eat. Our first meal in the U.S. consisted of a delicious king-size sandwich (almost everything is big in the USA). We sat down on a bench near an intersection and let the first impressions of the city soak in. At that moment, we realized why New York is also called “the city that never sleeps”: heavy traffic; people who come and go, and open, illuminated stores. After having had an excellent Turkish coffee at a Greek restaurant with Indian staff, we slowly went back to the hotel.

The next morning, we booked out of the hotel at 6.30 am already and traveled south by subway to *Battery Park*. From here, we took the ferry to *Liberty Island* and to the *Statue of Liberty* and then later on to *Ellis Island*. We hurried to get to the statue before the big rush of tourists would begin. The majestic appearance of the statue impressed us already when we were still on the ferry. We imagined what great an experience this moment must have been to the immigrants who had arrived in the U.S. by boat about 100 years ago. How released and relieved they must have felt when they finally caught sight of the Statue of Liberty after a crossing that had lasted for weeks.



After having reached the pedestal of the statue taking an elevator and stepping onto a small terrace, we could admire the breath-taking panorama with the skyline of Manhattan and the *Brooklyn Bridge* and take some pictures of it. After a little while, we left this world-famous symbol of freedom again and continued to our next destination by ferry: *Ellis Island*. This small island near New York symbolized to millions of immigrants the true gate to the “New World”. After having left the ferry and entering the great entrance hall, we became aware of the demanding procedure the new immigrants had to endure. Large-format black-and-white photographs illustrated the arrival of the immigrants, medical examination, IQ-tests, etc.



While entering the assembly room we tried to understand what kind of feelings the sisters of Tibor’s grandfather once had when they had arrived on this very island coming from the small village of Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva around 1910. There were different people, numerous national customs and traditional costumes, various languages such as Italian, Greek, Turkish, Russian, etc. They must have felt like being in the Tower of Babel and while looking through the windows they saw the huge buildings of New York City. Today, *Ellis Island* is both a museum and a memorial. Visitors can go on an audio tour and by listening to the stories of former

immigrants the learn to understand more vividly what those immigrants once had experienced. Furthermore, visitors can look up the names of immigrants who had once entered Ellis Island in search engines. We seized this opportunity as well and entered some Slovene family names that are common in the Raba Region such as Doncsecz, Mukics, Szukics, Horváth, Bedics, Merkli, or Holecz. Afterwards, you can look up the names you had searched for on a huge, black, circular board of honor made of metal, the *Wall of Honor*.



Deeply impressed we returned to New York in the early afternoon. Since our rental car was only available at 6 pm, there was still enough time for us to go for a walk in Manhattan. Some of the skyscrapers were so huge that we got dizzy by simply looking at them. Small old churches tried to stand out of the skyscrapers. Some time later we arrived at a tragic scene, *Ground Zero*: The place where the Twin Towers of the *World Trade Center* used to stick up majestically into the sky. It was a very disturbing experience to stand right there where thousands of people had lost their lives five years ago.



After having left this sad place we continued our trip northwards passing by the financial district, *Wall Street*, and the *Broadway*. Suddenly we arrived at an interesting district in New York City, which differed completely from those we had visited so far: *Chinatown*. Of course we were still in the U.S. but the things we saw there reminded us rather of a busy Chinese metropolis such as Beijing or Hong Kong. The Asian merchants sold their products, mostly fish and other seafood like living crabs, on small market stands. In the store windows you could see golden brown roasted chicken, which were mainly purchased by Asian customers.



Only a few streets away we already noticed the red-white-green colors dominating the adjoining district: *Little Italy*. That's America, changing from the Far East to

Southern Europe in the blink of an eye! There, we were finally offered what we had been missing before: The possibility to sit and eat outside in the open air.



On our journey through the U.S. we noticed several times that outdoor terraces in front of the restaurants are a rather rare commodity. Due to the fact that in Europe we are used to sitting outside the restaurants, we grasped this opportunity in *Little Italy*. After having eaten a tasty Italian dish and having been surprised once more by the sales taxes that are imposed on food and drinks of any kind in the U.S., we went back to the Upper West Side by subway to keep the appointment we had arranged with the car rental company.

Actually we had booked a small car, but in the U.S. "small" rarely means small and thus we were given a mid-size car with automatic transmission. From now on, we had to get used to these type of gears and see how we could leave Manhattan best during rush hour traffic. Luckily, we both kept our eyes on the road and what is more, a GPS navigation system was available to us. In the U.S., you indicate roads differently than here in Europe: Instead of place names only the road number and the direction where the road leads to (for example 320 East High Street) are signaled. It wasn't easy for two Europeans to find their way out of such a huge city like New York City, above all not in the middle of the rush hour. However, after some time we had enough routine to leave New York successfully and get on the Freeway 78 West. Our next destination was Bethlehem, a city with a population of 80'000 inhabitants situated in the state of Pennsylvania where a large number of Slovenes from the Raba and Mura Region had settled once.

Bethlehem

On the Freeway 78 traffic decreased noticeably, and thus we could move on more easily and after two hours, at 9pm, we finally arrived in Bethlehem. We were able to find the hotel, which we had booked a month ago, with the help of the GPS. The hotel porter awaited us enthusiastically and helped us carry our baggage up to the room. He seemed to be very interested in having a conversation with us, which was shown to be a rather tricky matter for us due to his strong American accent. It was not the first time that this American way of customer service came to our attention. As a European, you are somewhat unfamiliar with this overwhelming friendliness and frankness, which are positive aspects of course. After the hotel porter had shown us the furnishings, he left. We went to sleep because we wanted to be relaxed for the new day to come.

The next day, we got up already early in order to have enough time to explore the city. He who visits the city of Bethlehem instantly notices two things: Firstly, its separation into two parts caused by a river (*North Bethlehem* und *South Bethlehem*) and secondly, the prevalent influence of the Moravians on its townscape and history (Moravians = German-speaking, Protestant confraternity, which had once fled religious persecution in Moravia).



Right next to our hotel we came across a kind of open-air exhibition showing the industrial history of the Moravian community. Furthermore, we visited the buildings built by the Moravians which reflect the economic, cultural and historical heritage of the city.



So far we had only visited the historical sites situated in the northern part of Bethlehem and we thought we could have a cup of coffee before going to the southern part of the city. We ordered a coffee at a restaurant and were surprised when we got a 4-dl (about 13.5 oz.) paper cup filled with coffee. What is more, in the U.S. empty coffee cups are commonly refilled for free. It happens mostly not on request and so extremely quickly that you're amazed at the rapidity in which you find a newly-filled cup on your table. That's America, where customer service and hospitality are more than just a word! After so much caffeine we felt refreshed enough to continue exploring the city's history. In the southern part of Bethlehem we visited the Slovene *St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church*. Between 1880 and 1930, numerous Slovenes from the Mura and Raba Region emigrated to Bethlehem and settled primarily in the southern part of the city. Among these emigrants there were both Catholic and Protestant citizens. In the southern part of the city, where they also found jobs, they founded churches, in which they could gather.



While trying to enter St. Joseph's Church we noticed that the doors were locked. Suddenly, we heard a man's voice coming from a building across the road. When we turned round to look at the source of the sound, we spotted a priest who was painting the front door of his home white. He introduced himself as the priest of St. Joseph's Church. Since he was busy on that day, he suggested to meet us again the following day at 9 am and to unlock the church door for us and to show us round as well. We thanked him for his friendly offer and returned to the hotel quickly because we intended to meet up with Susan who has ancestors originating in the Mura Region. The three of us then went to the oldest book store in the U.S. (*Moravian Bookshop*), which was situated right opposite our hotel. Susan, the coordinator of the *Steelworkers' Archives* in Bethlehem, invited us to meet a man called Stephen. He had been working for *Bethlehem Steel* for many years and on his father's side, he is a Slovene originating in the Raba Region. There we also encountered Dennis and Ken who also work for the Steelworker's Archives. They asked Stephen about his working life at "Steel". We also got the opportunity to talk to Stephen about his Slovene roots. After this interesting meeting we went back to the hotel, since we knew that the schedule of the following day would be pretty packed. As we had promised the priest, we arrived at 9 am in order to visit St. Joseph's Church. When the priest unlocked the church doors, beautiful and colorfully-painted stained-glass windows shone at us. Each window had been dedicated to a village in the Mura or Raba Region. Below one of these windows it said "*Števanovci*".



After having talked to the priest we returned to the hotel because we had arranged an appointment with Margie and her husband Joe. Margie's father originates in Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva. Together we visited Charlene, Margie's cousin. During our conversation we discovered that Margie's and Charlene's grandfather, who had immigrated to the U.S, was probably the brother or cousin of Tibor's great-grandmother. After this pleasant and sympathetic get-together we drove back to the southern part of Bethlehem, heading for the huge steelworks (*Bethlehem Steel*). With Susan we had arranged that Ken, who had been working at „Bethlehem Steel” for more than forty years, would show us round the steel mill.



In front of the steelworks we got to know Mary who had immigrated to Bethlehem from Prekmurje. Mary told us she knew people who had emigrated from Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva in 1956 and used to know Tibor's father from their youth. Mary awaited us outside "*Bethlehem Steel*" with some welcome news saying that the people from Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva would invite us to dinner at a restaurant in the evening. However, before having dinner we met Mr. Amidon, a professor at Lehigh University. He told us about the immigrants of Bethlehem and their multicultural backgrounds. After all these positive experiences we spent a comfortable evening at an idyllic restaurant with people from Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva with whom we discussed with great interest.

The following day (Saturday), we visited Tibor's aunts who live in New Jersey and in the state of New York respectively and whom he had not seen since 1989. We started our trip already early in the morning and had to realize that the navigation system in the car and the road map showed different routes. After having reflected on the situation for some seconds, we decided to trust the navigation system, even though it indicated a road that was not even marked on the map. Luckily, we had made the right decision and we could find the way to the aunt's home without getting lost.

On Sunday morning, we drove to the southern part of Bethlehem. There we visited the cemetery where many Slovenes from the Mura and Raba Region were buried at the beginning of the 20th century. It lies on a small hill which offers a pretty view overlooking the city of Bethlehem. More than anything else, it was the impressive blast furnaces of the steelworks that caught our eye.



At the beginning of the 20th century, almost at least one member in every family was working at „Bethlehem Steel”. The steelworks was founded more than 100 years ago and since 1995 it isn't in operation anymore. The factory was by far the city's biggest employer and offered many people from the Mura and Raba Region an opportunity to earn money and to create a new life for themselves too. When we entered the cemetery through a side entrance, we felt like being on a cemetery in a Slovene village in the Raba Region because on many tombstones it said: „*Eti pocsiva*” („Here rests”).



After having taken some photographs, we went down to the Slovene *St. John's Windish Evangelical Lutheran Church* where we had been invited to attend service and to join the subsequent luncheon in the neighboring building of the church. The luncheon was prepared by the Altar Society of St. John's Church and was sponsored

by *Bethlehem/Murska Sobota Sister Cities Association*. At this meeting we were given the opportunity to talk to immigrants from the Mura Region and their descendants respectively. The senior citizens, who had been working at the steelworks, told about their childhood and youth, their work at „Steel” and their lives in multicultural South Bethlehem in a very touching way.

Still today, we remember with great delight these precious and kind encounters and luncheons. In the evening, we went to the Hungarian *St. Stephen's Church*, where Margit had invited us. Margit used to be a former classmate of Tibor's father back in Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva. In the neighboring building of the church there were more than 100 guests. Not only could we enjoy a rich and delicious dinner but we could also meet some immigrants from Vas County (Hungary). Full of interesting and valuable impressions and with full stomachs we went back to the hotel afterwards. We slowly started packing our bags since we had our flight back to Europe the next day. Before driving back to JFK Airport in New York City, we visited the Bedics family in Bethlehem. They lived in Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva where they used to be the neighbors of Tibor's grandparents. Tibor's father was very moved that we had visited the Bedics family, whom he was very close to, and he still remembers joyfully how nice it used to be in the „Šoulin” neighborhood, when everyone was still living at home in Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva!

We greatly enjoyed our brief, but nevertheless very intense time in the U.S. and we came back to Europe with a lot of newly-gained experiences and impressions. It was very interesting to search for evidence of the past of the city of Bethlehem such as the work of the Moravian community and, what was of utmost significance to us, to trace the Slovenes from the Mura and Raba Region who had immigrated to the U.S. once. During our research, we were lucky to meet many friendly and helpful people who supported our project. We owe our special thanks to them. A big thank you goes to *Susan Vitez*, the coordinator of the Steelworker's Archives who has supported us with all her effort, who has given us a lot of information and has organized several events. We would also like to thank *Mary Karol*. She also greatly supported our project and organized the meeting with some people who once had emigrated from Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva to Bethlehem: Margit Császár, Vendel Császár, his wife Anna and Joseph Koszár. They used to know Tibor's father in Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva. Our special thanks go also to *Steve* and *Patricia Bedics* who informed us about the Slovene heritage in South Bethlehem. Furthermore, we would like to thank *Joseph* and *Margaret Pinter McCarthy* for their commitment and the valuable information they provided us about the history of the Slovenes in Bethlehem. We would like to thank as well *Stephen Pinter*, Margaret Pinter McCarthy's father, who described vividly the life of the first Slovene (Windish) immigrants in South Bethlehem. We were so grateful that we had the opportunity to meet him in person and to learn more about Slovene Bethlehem at first hand. Also many thanks to Charlene Donchez-Mowers who gave us valuable information on Moravian Bethlehem and who introduced us to her Slovene (Windish) family.

Furthermore, we would like to point out that we really enjoyed our stay in the USA, in this great country. Never ever have we met so many friendly and helpful people like in the U.S. We are looking forward to our next trip, when we will cross the Atlantic Ocean again and continue tracing the history of the Slovene immigrants from the Mura and Raba Region in Bethlehem.