

Immigrant Experience through the Prism of Bilingualism and Biculturalism: The Case of Slovene Americans and Canadians

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Povzetek

Ljudje se izseljujejo v druge dežele iz različnih razlogov, od osebnih do ekonomskih in političnih. Ne glede na to, da jih pri tem žene prvenstveno želja po izboljšanju življenjskih razmer, je izseljenska izkušnja največkrat vsaj delno tudi travmatična. Pomeni namreč, da puščajo za seboj vse, kar jim je znano, velikokrat pa tudi njim drage osebe. Hkrati se soočajo z velikanskim izzivom prilagajanja novemu okolju. V članku predstavljeni primer slovenskih izseljencev v ZDA (Cleveland, OH; Washington, DC) in Kanadi (Toronto, ON; Vancouver, BC) ugotavlja, v kolikšni meri so se različne generacije izseljencev uspele vključiti v ameriško in kanadsko družbo. Poudarek je na jeziku in kulturi kot dveh najpomembnejših dejavnikih etnične identifikacije. V jezikovnem smislu raziskujemo tako jezikovno izbiro in vrsto diskurza pri posameznikih (sposojanje, kodno preklapljanje) kot tudi širši jezikovni položaj na ravni celotne skupnosti (stopnja dvojezičnosti, jezikovni premik od slovenščine k angleščini). Rezultati, ki se nanašajo na jezikovno rabo in odnos izseljencev do jezika ter na njihov občutek etnične pripadnosti, ponujajo zanimiv in dragocen vpogled v dvojezično in dvokulturno naravo izseljenske izkušnje.

Ključne besede: migracije, dvojezičnost, jezikovni premik, etnična identiteta, dvokulturnost

0 INTRODUCTION

Migration is a life-altering event. Regardless of the reasons for leaving one's home, this is always much more than just a question of physical re-location. Immigrants inevitably face a whole series of adjustments inextricably linked to their migration in order to function in the new environment. The language and culture of the host country are no doubt just two of the most crucial factors they encounter, which ultimately affect/(re)shape their sense of identity, be it on a personal, social, ethnic or some other level. Literature provides various theories as to how immigrants adapt to the new environment. Berry's acculturation model (1990), for instance, distinguishes between four alternative strategies used by minorities when they come into contact with the majority. They may either assimilate completely with the majority, retain a separate or marginalized status or, on the other hand, integrate into the mainstream society. While assimilation implies embracing the dominant culture to the point of completely giving up original cultural features (language, religion, traditions etc.), separation means just the opposite, i.e. a total rejection of the majority culture and clinging to the old customs. Marginalization is somewhere in between the two, with insecurity as far as identity is concerned, accompanied by a partial loss of the original language and insufficient acquisition of the dominant one. All three strategies seem to be lacking in terms of enabling the immigrants to thrive in the new society and simultaneously maintain a positive self-image. It is only the last strategy, integration, which is more positive, as it allows immigrants to both work toward becoming a valuable part of the mainstream society while preserving a degree of cultural identity (or at least appreciation/positive attitude toward it). This is also the strategy adopted by the Slovene immigrants in the U.S. and Canada. It is the aim of this paper to examine their situation in more detail, focusing on their sense of ethnic identity through the prism of their bilingual and bicultural experience.

1 RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to present as comprehensive a picture of the linguistic and cultural situation among Slovene Americans and Canadians as possible, I focused on four of their communities: Cleveland and Toronto as the largest ones in the U.S. and Canada respectively and Washington, DC and Vancouver, BC as examples of relatively small and fragmented communities. Also importantly, I took into account the time dimension of their immigration so as to be able to assess any variations occurring across the generations. The findings are based on the data collected by

means of participant observation, tape-recorded semi-structured interviews and follow-up self-report questionnaires probing the immigrants' language use and language attitudes as well as their perception of the relationship between the degree of mother tongue/heritage language maintenance and their sense of cultural and/or ethnic identity. The fieldwork in the mentioned communities has been underway for a number of years starting as far back as late 1980s in Cleveland and still going on in Vancouver, with the last visit there in the fall of 2016 and the next one scheduled for September of this year (e.g. Šabec 1992, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2011, 2016, 2017). It has encompassed as many as 576 subjects of both genders as well as a wide-ranging spectrum of ages, educational levels and generations. However, for the purpose of this article, the results for each individual study will not be presented separately; instead, the shared features and the differences between them will be pointed out when relevant to the immigrant experience through different time periods and in different locations. In other words, the emphasis will be on the narrative of the immigrants' and their descendants' experience in terms of linguistic adjustment (the degree of mother tongue maintenance in the case of the 1st generation and heritage language in the case of younger generations; the types of bilingual discourse used by them; language choice depending on various speech situations and interlocutors) and identity issues related to culture and ethnicity. Some of their questionnaire responses and excerpts from the interviews will be used for illustration purposes, and a brief outline of their immigration to the U.S. and Canada will be provided before the data presentation and analysis.

2 SLOVENE IMMIGRATION TO THE U.S. AND CANADA

With the exception of individuals such as missionaries and adventurers who came to North America as early as the 18th century, the first great wave of Slovene immigration occurred between the turn of the 19th century and 1924, when the U.S. passed the Immigration Act restricting the number of new immigrants. These were economic immigrants from the impoverished Slovene regions, which were at the time part of Austria Hungary, and from the Littoral and Karst, two regions annexed by Italy after WWI. Attracted by the promise of a better life, they headed predominantly to Cleveland, which was among the fastest growing cities in the U.S. and in dire need of unskilled and semi-skilled workers. The majority found employment in steel mills, construction industries and other local factories. They settled around Broadway and East 55th Street along the St. Clair Avenue, where they could for the most part function in their own dialects and only learned the most basic English for the workplace and for venturing outside

their very close-knit community. Hardworking and highly motivated, they soon saved sufficient funds to organize themselves, establishing their own parishes and parochial schools as well as other ethnic organizations such as fraternal benefit societies. These societies served as mutual fund companies on which they could rely in times of hardship, but at the same time they also served as centers of social and cultural activities (Klemenčič 1995: 198). Gradually starting their own businesses, they thus gained a solid economic base, allowing them to establish several Slovene National Homes in which they held meetings and organized various social functions, where Slovene singing societies, dance groups, polka bands, button-box clubs and even theater groups performed on a regular basis. The extent to which they managed to maintain their language and culture is perhaps best described by a quote from the Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups (Thernston 1980: 973): “In Cleveland, for example, St. Clair Avenue from 30th to East 79th Streets became by the 1920s so completely Slovene in character that English was the foreign language.”

Regardless of their superior existence in the New World compared to that in the “old country”,¹ the immigrants were well aware of their limitations due to lack of education and proficiency in English. Their priority was therefore to ensure that their children receive a solid education and learn English. The 2nd generation was thus fluent in both languages, speaking Slovene at home and English elsewhere. They were able to move up the social and economic ladder, for the most part moving into the more affluent and ethnically-mixed suburbs. This was even more true of their children, the 3rd and later generations, whose members are mostly college educated, but who only rarely speak Slovene now. They also have less and less time to take part in ethnic activities and, in contrast to the early immigrants, no longer intermarry and/or choose their friends and partners based on ethnic criteria. They have in fact become fully integrated into the mainstream society.

The second large immigration wave consisted mostly of political immigrants fleeing the Yugoslav Communist regime after WWII. Compared to the pre-war immigrants, they were better educated, spoke both dialectal and Standard Slovene and, for the most part, some English, which gave them an advantage in seeking employment. They, too, formed ethnic organizations, but no longer lived in segregated communities. In many ways, their children are much more similar to the 3rd generation pre-war immigrants than to the 2nd generation of pre-war ones.

A comparable Slovene Canadian community to Cleveland is Toronto (the former having 10,000 people of Slovene descent, the latter approximately 50,000). Toronto Slovenes exhibit a somewhat lower degree of intergenerational variation,

1 A common reference to Slovenia used by the early immigrants .

as most of them arrived in Canada after WWII. There is no residential concentration, but they have an equally impressive network of ethnic organizations as their Cleveland counterparts and certainly a very rich cultural life. In terms of language, however, the 2nd generation already is less engaged in ethnic activities and shows a lower level of Slovene proficiency than their pre-war counterparts in Cleveland.

The same can be said about Slovenes in the two smaller communities in which I conducted my research. Slovenes in Washington, DC are for the most part professionals who were already born in the U.S. and came to the capital city with the purpose of finding employment in various federal agencies. This leaves them little time to socialize with other Slovenes. Similarly, the Vancouver Slovenes have only one ethnic organization with just some 400 active members (Plut 2008). In both cases, active engagement in ethnic activities and the resources available to support them are thus relatively low and, consequently, proficiency in Slovene, on the decline.

Before moving to a more detailed linguistic analysis, we can conclude that the bilingual situation in all four communities is fairly unstable and highly transitional in nature, with a very high degree of mother tongue attrition. The only generation that was truly balanced as far as bilingualism is concerned was the 2nd generation of pre-war immigrants, while the 3rd generation already experienced a partial or even complete shift to English. This can certainly be at least partially explained by the stigma attached to foreign accents at the time, which is why parents neglected to teach their children Slovene. When later, in the 1960s, this was no longer the case and it became almost fashionable to search for one's roots, many 3rd generation Slovenes regretted not being able to speak their heritage language, but for most it was already too late. This three-generation cycle during which mother tongue attrition occurs is not unique to Slovenes and is, in fact, typical of many Americans of European origin. However, what is special in our case is that the pace at which this occurred was greatly accelerated among post war immigrants – to the point where we can claim that it has been almost shortened by one generation. Such a development is understandable in view of the unfavorable environment in which English is the prevalent and prestigious language and where, with insignificant numbers of new immigrants, Slovene has little if any practical value. It has to be noted, of course, that the language shift from Slovene to English applies only to the entire communities under investigation, as there may be and, in fact, there are individuals or groups of them who are putting considerable effort into preserving or learning the language (e.g. young people participating in the seminar of Slovene Language, Literature and Culture organized by the University of Ljubljana).

3 LINGUISTIC ASPECTS

Both on individual and on community level, the linguistic behavior of the immigrants is primarily characterized by their generational status. This is true of the level of their bilingual proficiency, the types of bilingual discourse that they use, the language choices that they make, the language attitudes that they hold and, consequently, the degree of their mother tongue/heritage language maintenance.²

3.1 Bilingual proficiency

For obvious reasons, it is the first generations that speak Slovene best, but who are not necessarily fully proficient in English, at least not in the initial stages of their settlement in the new country. This is especially true of the pre-war generation,³ whose Slovene was mostly dialectal and somewhat archaic compared to current Slovene, while their English was limited to borrowing the basic vocabulary. Their post-war counterparts were certainly more bilingual in that they either had some knowledge of English and/or were forced to upgrade it, as living in segregated communities was no longer an option for them. The most balanced in terms of bilingualism were no doubt the 2nd pre-war generation immigrants, who found themselves in a position where they had to use Slovene in communication with their parents and English with the outside world. Their children, on the other hand, largely lost the ability to use both languages, with English becoming the stronger or even the only language. This is also true of the 2nd post-war generation and of all younger generations, especially millennials. Proficiency in Slovene is therefore highest with those who were born in Slovenia and who received a formal education in Slovene, whereas with the American-born the factors encouraging heritage language maintenance are primarily frequent opportunities to use it (larger communities as opposed to small ones, Slovene being the household language, active involvement in ethnic activities) and positive attitudes toward the language. Social and geographical mobility, ethnically mixed marriages, and lack of contact with other Slovenes, on the other hand, almost inevitably lead to a shift toward English.

2 Mother tongue refers to the language of the Slovene-born subjects who actually immigrated to the U.S. or Canada. For their children and grandchildren Slovene is the heritage language. By the same token, only the first generations are immigrants in the true sense of word, while their descendants are, technically speaking, already U.S. or Canadian citizens. In this paper, they are all referred to as immigrants for the sake of economy.

3 By now most are deceased, but when I first started my fieldwork in Cleveland, I was still able to talk to many of them.

3.2 Types of bilingual discourse

An interesting phenomenon in researching the immigrant linguistic situation concerns the two distinct types of bilingual discourse: borrowing and code switching. Borrowing was typically used by the 1st pre-war generation who, for all practical purposes, spoke no English, but nevertheless borrowed English words either to fill lexical gaps or because some words were used with such frequency that it was all but impossible to adopt them. Borrowing involved combining English bases with Slovene affixes, resulting in examples such as *drajvati karo* from *to drive a car*. The adaptation was therefore both phonological and morphological. The borrowings or loanwords were mostly open-class items such as nouns, verbs and adjectives, while function words remained in Slovene. Borrowing is occasionally used by members of other generations as well, but with much lower frequency. Instead the bilingual discourse typical of them is so-called code switching (referred to by some as *half pa pu*⁴) whereby the two languages do not mix on the level of a single word, but remain discrete (e.g. Well, *ga kritizirajo, ker potem* government profitira, *ne? Ni nikoli* right whatever you do.⁵) The prerequisite for engaging in code switching is of course some degree of bilingual proficiency, which is why we no longer encounter it with those members of younger generations who only speak English. With those who do, however, the choice of language depends on a number of situational factors, the most important of which is the interlocutor. According to interpersonal accommodation theory (Giles, Bourhis and Taylor 1977), the speaker chooses a shared ethnic language in order to accommodate the addressee, while an intentional adherence to English despite both interlocutors' competence in both languages may be interpreted as an attempt to disassociate from them. The interlocutors speaking Slovene most often include family, friends and ethnic contacts. Other factors, especially linguistic ones, may also trigger code switching in either direction (e.g. emphasis, repetition, a temporary inability to retrieve a specific word from memory etc.), among the situational factors, however, we need to mention two more: the topic of conversation and the setting in which it takes place. Certain topics are more conducive to being discussed in Slovene (e.g. childhood memories, things associated with the "old country", and personal affairs as opposed to, say, business or government), and the same is true of informal vs. formal settings. Slovene is more likely to be heard at open-air events and while socializing than, for instance, during official meetings of ethnic organizations (in the beginning these were held in Slovene, but gradually switched to English so that younger members could take a more active part in them; the same is true of the ethnic press, where in the beginning the newspapers were published entirely in Slovene, but are now predominantly English with just a page or two in Slovene).

4 *Half pa pu* stands for *half English* and *half Slovene*.

5 Eng.: Well, he is being criticized because the government profits in the end, doesn't it? It is never right whatever you do.

Parts of discourse spoken entirely in Slovene tend to be influenced by English as well (the influence progressing with the immigrants' length of stay in the U.S. or Canada). Pronunciation is especially affected (the aspirated *p*, *t*, *k*, the so called *dark l*, the rhotic *r*). The same is true of Slovene inflectional patterns, which seem to be too complex for Slovene Americans and Canadians, resulting in their simplification, generalization or even omission (e.g. *smo šli z moja teta mož* instead of *smo šli z možem moje tete*).⁶ Word order is also affected due to the typological differences between Slovene and English (an example of which can be seen in the overuse of subjective personal pronouns in cases where Slovene as a pro-drop language does not require them). Furthermore, the influence of English accounts for the not so rare occurrence of calques such as *imeti dober čas* from *to have a good time* instead of Slovene *uživat/se imeti lepo*.

An interesting aspect shedding light on the linguistic situation in the communities under investigation are also language attitudes. These may play a role in the degree to which an individual is trying to preserve his or her mother tongue/heritage language. At times, however, the questions about them produce contradictory results, as will be shown in the next section.

3.3 Language attitudes

Only responses to the most relevant questions about language attitudes will be presented, as the inclusion of all would exceed the scope of this paper. We will take a closer look at the following: the immigrants' self-evaluation of bilingual proficiency, their preferred conversational language, their attitude toward code switching, the importance of preserving their mother tongue, and the role that they attribute to mother tongue in terms of their ethnic identification.

The first generations rate their proficiency in Slovene as high or very high, while their proficiency in English is rated poor in the case of pre-war immigrants and as good in the case of post-war ones. In addition, speaking is rated much higher than the more demanding skills of reading and writing. The ratings for both languages are more balanced in the case of the 2nd pre-war generation, whereas in the case of all other generations English scores considerably higher than Slovene. With the younger generations, the ratings for reading and writing are also on the increase compared to their older counterparts. As for the preferred conversational language, all of the 1st generation pre-war immigrants choose Slovene; among the post-war ones, this percentage is decreasing. The 2nd pre-war generation vacillates between Slovene and English, while for everybody else the only option is English.

⁶ Eng.: We went with my aunt's husband (In Slovene both the word order and the cases are used incorrectly).

As for their attitudes toward code switching, most are quite tolerant of it, the exception are 1st generation of post-war immigrants who feel that code switching is “corrupting” the language. The others realize that it is practically impossible to speak “pure” Slovene in an English-dominant environment and that at least some Slovene is better than nothing. Some also see it as facilitating communication between the older and younger generations.

The following are some examples of questionnaire responses that illustrate the dilemmas facing the immigrants with regard to language choice.

- During the first years we spoke Slovene at home. When our children started school and made friends with the neighborhood kids, they began to use English also at home. When our first son went to kindergarten, he was able to recite Ciciban (Oton Župančič) and his teacher told me that nobody at school would listen to him. I realized that it was not their fault that we lived in Canada, that this was their country, so I bought him English “Nursery Rhymes”. My husband and I also needed English at work.
- The state of Slovene in the Slovenian⁷ Society is not particularly promising. We speak English at our functions. Even our board meetings are always conducted in English because some don’t speak Slovene at all. I always try to speak Slovene with those members who know Slovene, but they all soon switch to English. It is even more difficult to use Slovene in e-mails. I still write the society newsletter in both languages even though I am sure that practically nobody reads the Slovene part of it. We have Slovene books and films and I use them mostly in language classes. Sometimes somebody borrows a book. Every now and then we play Slovene films at a social event, but there is little interest.

The responses regarding the importance of preserving the mother tongue, however, are the ones that strike us as most intriguing, if not paradoxical. Almost all, even those who lack proficiency in Slovene, are convinced that it is very important to preserve the mother tongue/heritage language, attributing great symbolic value to it. The most notable exceptions are some millennials who no longer see it as a viable option and view it only as a nostalgic remnant of the past. However, there are a few equally young individuals who are learning Slovene, primarily to communicate with their grandparents, but also in order to be in contact with Slovenia. The attitudes toward the language are therefore predominantly positive, as seen in the following examples.

- I feel that it is important to preserve the Slovenian language as that will also preserve the Slovenian culture, and knowing your roots and very you came from is very key.

⁷ Both *Slovene* and *Slovenian* are correct and are used interchangeably by various organizations, publications etc.

- For me the preservation of the language is very important for cultural identity. I probably believe this because the language was taught to me at an early age and so it is not a burden to learn it later in life (although I could use many lessons to improve). I think understanding the language helps one better understand the people, be they immigrants to the United States – as my parents were – or the Slovenians living in Slovenia today. There is a connection between language and thinking, so I appreciate that my language skills, poor though they are, can still provide me with special insight into the culture and people.

Finally, the subjects were asked to rank several factors on a scale from least to most important in terms of how important they consider them for ethnic identification. Their answers showed a discrepancy between their previously declared belief about the importance of preserving mother tongue, as only the 1st generation of pre-war immigrants ranked language as the second most important (after culture), while for everybody else, language came fourth or even fifth after culture, religion, cuisine, music and work ethic (the last one not being an ethnic feature, but nevertheless included because of the wide-reported pride by the respondents in their being hardworking and honest). Such results inevitably raise the question of the relationship between language and culture, i.e. whether the immigrants see themselves as more bilingual or bicultural and how this affects their sense of ethnic identity. This will be addressed in greater detail in the next section.

4 CULTURAL AND ETHNIC ASPECTS

For the early immigrants in particular, the contact with the New World, which differed significantly from, say, life in the rural areas of Austria-Hungary of the day presented something of a culture shock. They knew, however, why they had undertaken the long journey to America and were determined to do everything in their power to succeed in the new society. With hard work and an entrepreneurial mentality they did, opening up new opportunities for their children and grandchildren. In the beginning especially, they relied heavily on each other, forming ethnic organizations and establishing National Homes, where they could meet on a regular basis, exchange experience and advice, relax in a safe environment, reminisce about the “old country”, make plans for the future - in short, feel “at home” with other Slovenes. In Cleveland, for instance, they even built their own Old People’s Home, and had several Slovene parishes with parochial schools (which eventually got reduced to Sunday schools or short language courses due to diminishing enrolment). Numerous cultural groups from singing societies to polka bands were formed and performed at various events. The situation in

Toronto was similar. Both Slovene Americans and Canadians also published Slovene newspapers and had their own radio stations. The smaller communities had, understandably, fewer members and resources, but nevertheless endeavored to preserve their culture.

With the new generations, the gap between the American way of life and the old ways gradually narrowed, with elements of both cultures slowly blending into each other. This does not mean, however, that all features of Sloveneness were given up. As is evident from the participants' responses, many persevere until today and are cherished as something very valuable. And while the early immigrants understandably declared themselves to be Slovene, members of the later generations say that while they are Americans or Canadians first, they are also Slovene. For many, the Slovene part actually plays a significant role in their lives, as illustrated by the following account by a 2nd generation Slovene American:

- Knowing my ancestry as well as I do – both of my parents were born in Slovenia, I have visited there with relatives on numerous occasions, and I grew up in a community of Slovenians – grounds me tremendously – that is, it helps me transcend my everyday reality and takes me to another place and frame of mind!). Understanding my heritage gives me a strong sense of personal history and encourages me to explore and keep alive, as much as possible, family connections. In a way, it also makes me feel special and unique. Having a direct line to my roots helps me better understand the people around me and, perhaps, makes me more interesting as well.

As far as culture is concerned, the respondents define it very broadly. For most it means anything from traditions, customs, music, religion, and holidays to cuisine – anything that reminds them of their “old country” or the country of their ancestors.

- All of these – food, music, language, religion, customs – do seem important and relevant in keeping alive my identity as Slovenian. Having spent much time in Slovenia itself, I see that many of these factors actually connect me to the older generation of Slovenian immigrants to the U.S. more than they do to current Slovenians living in Europe. If I had to choose, perhaps language and religion are the two things that confirm my Slovenian identity. There is some irony there because religion seems to be waning in Slovenia, particularly with young people, while here religion is a strong binder for the immigrant community, which has built a cultural and community center on the church grounds. In the practice of religion, we are able to maintain customs that are uniquely Slovenian (butarice,⁸ Easter blessing baskets).

8 Richly decorated greenery taken to church on Palm Sunday for special blessing.

Some, on the other hand, view culture in the narrower sense of the word and report about reading Slovene literature; there are even some who try their hand at writing themselves.

- I read more in English, Slovene books only when they are available or when I bring them from Slovenia. Literature broadens my horizons, calms me, cheers me up and, when talking about Slovene literature, it is a source of information about my home country and a way of reminiscing about it. When I read a Slovene book, I feel more “at home”, it is like balm for the soul.
- The inspiration grew stronger; I began to write plays and also poems for adults and also for children, which were used for various functions and performances.
- In writing I found a source of creativity, which made my life easier /.../ I began to search for some inner-self /.../ at the moment when this inner-self became present in my thoughts, words began to pour out unprompted as if somebody were whispering them softly in my ear. Writing filled my time and soul and heart because of the beauty of the Slovene words. /.../ I still help with functions if asked; of course, very few still understand the Slovene language.

Such enthusiasts are, of course, exceptions. Also, with time, the number of ethnic organizations and cultural events is declining, especially in smaller communities. Gone are the days of Slovene theater groups, and while there are child choruses that still sing Slovene folk songs, they have to learn the lyrics by heart as they no longer understand the language. On the other hand, I have witnessed, on the occasion of the Wine Festival organized by the Vancouver Slovenian Society, how two Canadian-born children recited Slovene poems written by their grandmother.

Another aspect worth pointing out is the very dynamic nature of the immigrant experience. An excellent example of that is the way the music that Slovenians brought with them was adapted to the new circumstances and actually contributed to the American music scene and culture. This is vividly reflected by accordion/polka music, which reached the peak of its popularity with Frank Yankovich as the Polka King.⁹ Rather than merely transferring this traditional music from the “old country” to America, the immigrants included in it elements of other music genres such as early jazz with typical swing style and even “American” instruments such as the banjo. By so doing they managed to produce an authentic Slovene American/Canadian style that catered both to the ethnic sentiment and

⁹ Frank Yankovich, dubbed «America's Polka King», released over 200 recordings in his career, sold over 30 million records, had two golden records 15 years before Frank Sinatra and won a Grammy award in 1985.

to the broader music taste of the rest of America. The manner in which the melodies, the rhythm and the lyrics of these otherwise typically Slovene folk music combined both the old and the new is a perfect example of how successful Slovene immigrants and their descendants were in fitting into the new environment. The fact that in 2007 the City of Cleveland named a square after Yankovich and that the Slovenes built the Polka Hall of Fame and Museum there is testimony to their contribution to their new homeland.

5 CONCLUSION

The Slovene immigrant experience in the U.S.A. and Canada seen from a bilingual and bicultural perspective suggests that language is not as central to their ethnic identity as we would be led to believe from the participants' responses about the importance of its preservation. It is "an important, but not a unique part" (Edwards 2009: 2), its value being more or less symbolic. After all, we live our lives through language and the actual state of affairs on the ground shows that this is in most cases English, while Slovene is rapidly disappearing, especially among the younger generations.¹⁰ Their sense of ethnic awareness instead comes from shared cultural characteristics such as traditions, music, religion, and cuisine. They perceive these as a positive addition to their American and Canadian identity, i.e. an enrichment of their lives and enhancement of their self-image. In addition, almost all maintain some contact with Slovenia (in the recent decades also via the internet), which was most obvious in 1991, when they unanimously supported Slovenia's struggle for independence. Despite the rather poor prospects of long-term maintenance of mother tongue/heritage language, elements of culture stand a relatively good chance of surviving. Even some millennials, who profess their preference for globalization and present themselves as citizens of the world, admit to having a special affection for their family's history and traditions. Based on the somewhat contradictory data about attitudes, we could conclude that Slovene Americans and Canadians base their ethnic identity both on language and culture; in reality, however, they seem to be more bicultural than bilingual. In either case, their immigrant experience is a successful one as they have managed, in a relatively short period of time, to become not just an integral but also a productive and creative part of mainstream society in their respective new homelands, while at the same time maintaining appreciation of their heritage.

¹⁰ It is, of course, for precisely this reason that the linguistic situation is so much more intriguing and deserving of being studied and documented in terms of changes related to language contact while they last.

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