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Emigration as Augmented War Experience: An (Auto)biographical Account of Ted Kramolc

L'émigration comme expérience de guerre augmentée :
un compte-rendu (auto)biographique de Ted Kramolc

Urška Strle

Abstract

The biographical reconstruction of Canadian-Slovenian visual artist, writer, interior designer and art mentor Ted Kramolc (1922–2013) as presented in the following article focuses in particular on his life before he reached Canada. This reconstruction is based on the notion that his decision to emigrate should be viewed as an extended experience of the Second World War. The author has based this article on her own belief that in order to understand the social consequences of war, it is necessary to fortify historiographic sensibilities regarding personal experiences, interpersonal relationships and the variety of meanings ascribed to war. At the same time, the author seeks to broaden the point of observation to both the time preceding the war and the time following it. Empirically, the article is supported both by the available archive material as well as an analysis of as-yet-unpublished autobiographical sources. Insights from Kramolc's literary oeuvre, which to a large extent derive from lucid reflections on his own life experiences, also feature in the article.

Keywords: Ted Kramolc, war, emigration, biographical writing

Résumé

La reconstruction biographique de l'artiste visuel, écrivain, designer d'intérieur et mentor en art canado-slovène Ted Kramolc (1922-2013) présentée dans cet article se concentre sur la vie de l'auteur avant son arrivée au Canada. Elle est basée sur l'idée que sa décision d'émigrer doit être considérée comme une expérience prolongée de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Cet article part de la conviction selon laquelle, pour comprendre les conséquences sociales de la guerre, il est nécessaire d'examiner les aspects historiographiques concernant les expériences personnelles, les relations interpersonnelles et la variété des significations attribuées à la guerre. En même temps, l'auteur cherche à élargir le champ d'observation à la fois aux années d'avant-guerre et d'après-guerre. Empiriquement, l'article s'appuie à la fois sur les archives disponibles et sur une analyse de sources autobiographiques encore inédites. Des aperçus de l'œuvre littéraire de Kramolc, qui découlent dans une large mesure de réflexions lucides sur ses propres expériences de vie, figurent également dans cet article.

Mots-clés : Ted Kramolc, guerre, émigration, écriture biographique



To begin with

The name of Slovenian-born Canadian Ted Kramolc (1922–2013) is known in both countries. By vocation, he was an artist who left his mark in both the visual and the literary arts. He exhibited his paintings, graphics and drawings at more than a hundred exhibitions in Canada, the USA, Austria, Argentina, and, following 1989, also in Slovenia. Some of his paintings have been exhibited alongside Canada's greatest works of fine art, for example, in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa as well as in art galleries in Toronto and Hamilton (Košan, *passim*; Jurak, 416–418).

His short stories and novels have also received favourable critical treatment. Most of his output was published in Slovenian, yet he also wrote in English. As early as 1946 he was publishing and illustrating youth and children's literature as a refugee in Austria (Švent, 185, 255). Later on, most of his oeuvre was published through exile publishing outlets and literary periodicals in Canada, Argentina and the USA (Maver) as well as in Slovenia after 1991, including independent publications (Kramolc 1992, 1997, 2002, 2008). In 2003 he was a nominee for the distinguished Slovenian Kresnik Prize for his novel *Tango v svilenih coklah* (Tango in Wooden Clogs), an extraordinary achievement for a writer who had at that point spent over half a century in the English-speaking environment. He maintained his literary vitality to the last, planning and creating all the while. He spent his last months working on his three-part autobiographical novel, the tentative titles for the parts being *Doma*, *V tujini* and *Spet Doma* (Home, Abroad and Home Again).¹

Kramolc's biography bears the distinct mark of an immigrant, as is evident from his literary ambitions. It has been written down and published several times, so this article will not reiterate the facts in a detailed manner (see Košan). Some fundamental biographical data do, however, bear repeating. He was born on the outskirts of Ljubljana as Božidar Marija, the firstborn child of Luka (1892–1974) and Marija (1894–1993) Kramolc. His brother Nikolaj-Niko (1923–2018) came a year later. The young Kramolc family was defined from the social and identity perspectives by their migratory character. Both Luka, the father, and Marija, the mother, arrived in Ljubljana, the cultural and political capital of the Slovenians, from the fringes of the Slovenian ethnic territories. As a part of Europe's political and military flashpoints following the First World War, these territories were ground zero for the aftermath of the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy. Luka originally came from the border region of Carinthia (Kärnten/Koroška) that had been severed from the province's former centres after the larger part of Carinthia, with a substantial Slovenian minority, was ceded to Austria in 1920. His mother arrived from the Tolmin region, settled mainly by ethnic Slovenians that came under Italy after 1920 as part of the Julian March (Venezia Giulia/Julijska

1) Ted Kramolc in a letter to the author, 17.12.2012.



Krajina). It seems like an ironic twist of fate that immigrant and refugee life defined the paths of both their sons following the next global military conflict.

The brothers, who would maintain a tight bond throughout their entire lives, received a solid education. Božo,² as Ted was called in his youth, had already warmed up to painting during secondary school in Ljubljana. The Second World War was the reason he chose to forego studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, opting instead to study architecture under Jože Plečnik (1872–1957) and later dropping out. Apart from his time spent in fascist internment (1942–1943), he underwent private schooling under Božidar Jakac (1899–1989), Mitja Švigelj (1910–?), Matej Sternen (1870–1949) and France Gorše (1897–1986). According to the *Jutro* newspaper, Božo first drew attention to himself with an independent exhibition featuring “about thirty images” that took place during Christmastime 1944 in the passageway of Ljubljana’s Skyscraper building.³

In the last moments of the war, Božo fled with his brother Niko to Austrian Carinthia, where he remained as a refugee for more than three years. In mid-July 1948 he arrived on the Sobieski at Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada’s main port of entry on the Atlantic coast, known under the name of Pier 21. He served one year in compulsory contract work on the railway as a landed immigrant. Once in Toronto, he enrolled at the Ontario College of Art, graduating in 1951. He became a Canadian citizen in 1953 and changed his name from Božo to Ted. He married Ljudmila, also a postwar Slovenian immigrant, and they had two sons, Tom (Tomaž) and Teddy. Ted worked as an interior designer and designed residential and holiday homes alongside his main work, took on art commissions for the Canadian-Slovenian community and taught amateur painters in Toronto. In 1990, after almost half a century, he traveled back to his native country, where he often exhibited in the years to come. He last visited Slovenia with his son Tom in 2011.

* * *

The article seeks to shed light on Kramolc’s biography in the time segment prior to his becoming Canadian. His departure to Canada was strongly marked by the Second World War, which at the same time profoundly determined his power of expression, as his noteworthy war narratives and stories about the scars that war left on people were not only relayed with words, but also with images. Based on my reflection on Kramolc’s life, it stands to reason that his decision to move to Canada must first and foremost be viewed through the lens of his extended experience of war.

2) Ted Kramolc was baptized as Božidar Marij, which literally translates to Theodore Maria, hence he took on the name Ted in Canada.

3) “Božidar M. Kramolc razstavlja,” *Jutro*, 3.1.1945, 3.



The strains woven through Kramolc's biographies confirm the historiographical reasoning of shifting the lens away from solely military and political events in order to also take into account economic, social and cultural circumstances (Verginella 1995, 8), in turn allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the war and its effects on society. Moreover, in order to understand the social consequences of the war, it is necessary to fortify historiographical sensitivity towards personal experiences, the architecture of interpersonal relationships and the variety of meanings attributed to the war. Thus, it is important to expand the point of observation to the time following and preceding the war. In its subtler aspects, the biographical approach allows for a highly interesting point of view on the war, which, of course, does not come without its blind spots and epistemological challenges. Yet a personal perspective – including that of Kramolc – may provide a clear realization that war, in addition to mass deaths, physical destruction and many forms of dehumanization, also brings about consequences that are invisible and highly intimate, and as such more difficult to determine. Alessandro Portelli defines these as “the experience of loss and the vision of death” (Portelli, ix).

During the war, Kramolc spent time as an arrestee, hostage, internee, amnestee. Toward the end of hostilities, he became a refugee-turned-permanent-immigrant as a result of various circumstances. In none of these societal roles did he ever hold a weapon in his hands. Instead, he found himself at the cold end of a rifle barrel held by an Italian *carabiniere* one spring day in 1942. His entire war arsenal consisted of weapons of a much softer caliber – sketchbooks, pencils, pens, brushes, pieces of charcoal. Taking into account the chronology of his artistic works, it was the war with its tragic course and uncertain outcome that triggered an intense creative outpouring, which he maintained until the end of his long life. The direct experience of the war encouraged his more serious ventures in drawing and is also deeply embedded in his first autobiographical writings.

The context of remembrance and texture of memory

I knew Ted Kramolc even before I met him in person. This is because I read all his literary writings available in Slovenia in one fell swoop. For me, his writing was extremely important for unravelling the complexity of interpersonal relationships as they emerged among Slovenian immigrants in Canadian society. The sincerity with which Kramolc imbued his depictions of sensitive social topics, the picturesqueness furnishing his verbal expressions, and the sense of detail, the seemingly ancillary situational storytelling strains that sometimes play host to events of life importance all aroused my interest. I met Ted for the first time in April 2012, in a half-empty



café in Toronto. A lively conversation over a hearty brunch ensued and lasted for several hours. I was surprised by his open character, mental acumen, sense of irony and warmth, which showed neither contrivance nor naivety. Despite the pleasant interpersonal chemistry established between us almost instantly, I had no particular problems imagining him as capricious and sharp, never one to mince words.

Although Kramolc had expressed his personal views on the past in his correspondence and interviews, and also wove them into the fates of his literary characters, the purpose of this article is to convey my impressions of Kramolc and to support them by analyzing (auto)biographical sources that emerged, both directly and indirectly, during our meetings. I believe the decision to include unpublished quotations in the present text is methodologically relevant in addition to its fresh informational value. This is due to my familiarity with the context in which the quotations were shaped, which exceeds acquaintance with the context in which other sources were created.

The reason for our meeting had to do with Kramolc's experience of internment in the Italian Fascist camp at Gonars.⁴ Despite this thematic focus, Kramolc's narrative revolved entirely organically around the experience of refugees and emigration. Kramolc wrote vividly just as he painted colourfully, and his oral narration was lively indeed. His diction was structured into clear lines of thought, yet retained stylistic diversity. His raspy voice, occasionally interrupted by a cough, showed exceptional dynamics in both tempo and power, in his imitations of various dialects, emotional colouring and the like. As an observer of his spoken narrative, I gleaned much semantic content from it. I emphasize this as Kramolc's narration lost a large portion of its narrative flavour in the course of its transition to official register, written language. In addition, he often peppered his narratives with English expressions (Šabec). After leaving Slovenia, he wrote regularly in Slovenian, but spoke it less and less – in the final years, mostly with his brother Niko.⁵

A further narrative stroke of his bears mentioning. Although normally charming and well-mannered, Kramolc often added to his narration mild, often religiously tinged vulgar phrases. Alexandro Jodorowsky emphasizes how curses bring about an “endearing dose of revolution that breaks the mold of family, society and most anything,” yet he also warns that their use points toward an impoverished state of consciousness, especially compared to the language of art and poetry (Jodorowsky, 217). Curse words, however, do not simply stand for “fillers devoid of meaning” (Babič, 39). Instead, they are emotionally charged exclamations that are of particular

4) The interview that arose from this meeting was part of the research carried out within the context of the research project “Italian Fascist Camps as Remembered by Slovenes” (2011–2013) under the helm of Oto Luthar and Marta Verginella. My journey to Canada was made possible by a postdoctoral grant for research on Slovenes in Canada awarded to me in 2012 by the International Council for Canadian Studies in Ottawa.

5) Ted Kramolc in a letter to the author, Toronto, 10.12.2012.



interest to me as a researcher utilizing the oral history method. The sense of indecency notwithstanding, curses offer insight into additional interpretational mechanisms. Kramolc often added exclamations such as “Holy Christ!,” “Christ sakes!,” “Holy God!,” “Holy Jesus!,” “Holy shit!,” “Goddamn!,” “What the hell” or even “Fuck you!” and “Fuck off!” to his speech, utterances he often used in his literary texts as well. He sometimes used insults such as “idiots” for the Italian guardsmen in the Gonars concentration camp, “fat bastard” for the papal nuncio who visited the starving Gonars internees, “these devils” for the Ljubljana jail interrogators and “obtuse asses” for the petty bourgeoisie of Ljubljana. He called the arrogant Italian officer whom Kramolc’s mother had pleaded with for her son’s release a “macaque.” He often illustrated the dehumanized status of a person during wartime using the word “dog,” denoting a low level of worth, or worthlessness.

These kinds of expressions are often ignored narrative details, even though they underscore the emotion of each viewpoint. Even in Kramolc’s narrative, such elements indicate a high degree of subjective engagement (Nežmah, 21). His use of profanity almost without a doubt points to past situations that were traumatic, unjust, or at least distinctly unpleasant for him to recall. Most of the times he expressed them in a timbre clearly denoting dislike, distress, indignation, anger, pain, fear and disbelief. In his relatively short but meaningful oral narrative from 2012, Kramolc expressed his experiences using swear words especially when recalling two episodes in his life. The first concerns wartime, the second, disagreement with the core of the Slovenian immigrant community, which, according to him, defined the sentiment of “Slovenianness” in Canada too narrowly, while at the same time forcing memories of the war and the postwar era to well back up – precisely what he himself had wanted to forget.

War, one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse

For Kramolc, direct contact with the uncompromising nature of wartime began with his arrest by the Italians in the spring of 1942 in Ljubljana’s Tivoli, a park near the centre of the city. At first, he was kept as a hostage in the Italian military quarters of Ljubljana. Soon after, he was interned in Gonars near Udine, where he “encountered hunger and melancholy for the first time in his life.”⁶ From March 1942, the Italian fascist camp in Gonars was intended especially for internees from the Ljubljana province who were regarded as suspect by the occupying Italian fascist authorities and who were rounded up in raids, one of which targeted Kramolc. The fact that he

6) NUK, Archival and bibliographic collection of Slovenes abroad, Ted Kramolc, letter to Franc Pibernik, Toronto, 24.11.2007.



was taken into custody took him by surprise and scared him, as could be perceived from the picturesque way he recalls unjustified loss of his freedom:

But I don't think about it anymore. It's been so many years, but it really bore heavily on me at the time... So why did I get arrested for drawing? I went to Tivoli park with a sketchbook, took some charcoal and some pencils, and there was this one tree as I remember, an oak, and I sat down on one of the benches there and drew, y'know. [...] This was not, how should I put it, subversive behaviour, not exactly planting dynamite, right ... I wanted to draw that tree and the sketchbook was almost full. And then I feel a kind of cold pressure on the back of my head. And behind me, in Italian: "Alto le mani!" Hands up! And then he goes – I forgot how it went: "Turn around." I look back. He starts cursing. And then the *carabiniere* handcuffs me, without any reason whatsoever. And he takes the sketchbook, and the pencils, and the charcoal and so on. And then they forced my hands behind my back, and now there's another chain around my waist ... "Holy Christ!" I said. "What is... But what is this?" Inside a police car I went and there were already prisoners or arrestees sitting inside. Just young people, brats.⁷

As it appears from the quotation above – and this is something that also holds true for his literary depictions – Kramolc usually frames his memories of the war with situational anecdotes dominated by interpersonal relationships. In so doing, he not only recalls various episodes, but also comments on them and provides us clearly with his remembered emotional state. He describes his internment experiences with graphic accounts similar to those in which he depicts the moment when he was arrested. Typically, his narration focuses more on interactions with fellow prisoners and soldiers than on the conditions in which the Gonars inmates eked out their existence. In the quotation below, he conveys his tragicomic impressions of the morning *Appells*. Among other things, this particular narrative shows the system of the Italian concentration camps as being highly disorganized, a point highlighted by many internees in their own tales. Organizational confusion conditioned the extreme forms of neglect suffered by the inmates, contributing significantly to the camp's high levels of morbidity and mortality. Although there was an unmistakable anti-Slavic sentiment in the Italian fascist camp system (Verginella 2016 *passim*) – Gonars was one of the *campi di concentramento per slavi* – civilians there were generally not exposed to physical torture and slave labour, something that contributed to the mass deaths in Nazi camps. The anti-Slavic sentiment is more clearly evident when viewed through the prism of the disastrous distribution of camp food, drink and packages from home, impossible living and hygiene conditions, insufficient medical aid and the

7) If no other source is referred to, all the quotations are taken from the interview, which took place in Toronto on April 27, 2012. The quotations from the transcript have been translated from Slovenian.



indifference of camp management to the aforementioned logistical issues (Capogreco; Luthar, Verginella, Strle).

And then they'd count us, that was the biggest joke of them all. And all that in the burning sun. This was your morning coffee ... Coffee [sarcastic, author's note]. They'd line us up and that sun beat down on all those shorn heads, one or two would fall unconscious. And the commander said: "Well then take him to the infirmary." Meaning one would leave, and the two who carried him; so there were three gone. "Uno, due, tre, quattro, cinque" And there were three fewer. [laughs] Of course there were three fewer! Because they took him to the infirmary, y'know. The two would come back ... And the idiots, right, they'd count again. "One's missing." "Yes, however could that be possible if we took him to the infirmary, right? He's in the infirmary over there." In the meantime, the third one would fall unconscious ... And that was it ... What should have lasted maybe ten minutes sometimes took an hour or even two! Can you imagine, such idiots in the army ... Oh, God! Oh well. The diet was very "healthy." [laughs] We got macaroni soup, and with it you'd get a bun, right, and a piece of cheese. That's it. Different story if you got a package, though.

Despite the exhaustion that would usually plunge the camp internees into an oppressive state of idleness, Kramolc joined a group of artists in Gonars who managed to keep creating art despite the scarce conditions. "A dog wouldn't want to piss on the stuff we used for drawing," he cynically, yet meaningfully, underpinned the lack of basic drawing equipment in the camp. He exhibited his works alongside his peers Marjan Tršar (1922–2010), Nikolaj Pirnat (1903–1948), Jakob Savinšek (1922–1961) and the brothers Nande (1899–1981) and Drago (1901–1982) Vidmar⁸ at an improvised group exhibition of paintings and drawings. "That exhibition," recalls Kramolc, "was downright primitive, there were no frames, but it was an important one! That's when I started drawing seriously."

Kramolc was more affected by the background behind his internment – as in unravelling how it had even come about in the first place – than the fact that he was imprisoned in inhumane conditions. Through his dynamic intonation and choice of words, Kramolc unequivocally expressed the mixture of anger and indignation that reawakened in his memory registers whilst recounting the reasons for the arrest, which occurred due to the betrayal of someone who clearly knew Kramolc.

Seating order. Who did he get that from? He got this from the Slovenes. Not only that! He must have been my classmate to have known where I was sitting. Something was terribly wrong all over the place. And I'm ... Now, this stuff will drive you up the wall when you start thinking about it. And too much! How is this possible, what is this?! It's like chess!

8) Robert Škrj, "Painter Božidar Ted Kramolc Exhibiting in Slovenia," *Primorske novice*, 11.6.2011.



Oh, God! [...] Behaviour like that back then, in those petty-bourgeois conditions in that environment, all of a sudden you are like a dog. Nobody, y'know. And it really did happen. And I thought they were going to shoot me. But why? If only I knew why, dammit! And I know who ... These things all come to light. Slovenians can't ... Ljubljana folk can't keep their mouths shut. I know how it ... [pause] ... but it doesn't matter.

Kramolc's resentment towards his "petty-bourgeois" fellow citizens of Ljubljana was unequivocally expressed several times during our exchanges. It seems this resentment, imbued with a sense of mistrust, originated in the accusation that led to him ending up in internment. It was there that exposure to hunger, adverse weather conditions and psychological hardships seriously damaged his health, and in Gonars he suffered from chronic pleurisy. Due to health issues, he was recognized as unfit for military service and thus was not drafted during the entire war.⁹

The war also deprived Ted Kramolc, then still going by Božidar, of five of his family members. His uncle Viktor Kramolc (1887–1944) was arrested for supplying the Carinthian partisans at Pentecost in 1943, taken to Dachau and Buchenwald, and then died in Auschwitz. Viktor's underage son Ferdinand (Nantej, 1928–1947) was first taken to the Klagenfurt Penitentiary and then to the Jugendschutzlager Moringen-Solling concentration camp south of Hanover. After the war he died in Austrian Carinthia as a result of internment and medical experiments.¹⁰ In the meantime, Viktor's wife, Marija Kramolc, developed severe mental health problems due to grief brought about by the deportation of her husband and son, and died at the end of 1944. Soon after, the Gestapo burned down the homestead, leaving Viktor's two underage daughters, Marija (Mara) and Ljudmila (Milka), deprived of family and property.¹¹ Luka Kramolc's cousin Lenart Kramolc (1902–1945) died in Dachau, and his brother Ožbolt (1915–?) went missing as a partisan freedom fighter in October 1944.¹² In the war, Ted lost several friends and acquaintances, his youth, and for a long time, his "optimism and faith in humanity" (Kramolc 1992, 281).

At the behest of his brother Niko, Ted Kramolc retreated to Austrian Carinthia before the end of the war. According to Luka Kramolc's personal archives, both fugitive sons were initially identified as members of the SS and charged with connections to the collaborationist White Guard and the fascists.¹³ All of this points to an extremely

9) SI AS 1926 Luka Kramolc, t. e.3, a. e.22, complaint to the Ljubljana housing commission, 1.11.1948.

10) Kramolc wrote the stirring short story "Večeri pod Peco" (Evenings under Mount Peca) as a refugee and later published it as the introductory text to his collection of short stories *Podobe iz arhivov* (Images from the Archives); it includes a depiction of Nantej's death, which he witnessed personally.

11) SI AS 1926 Luka Kramolc, t. e.3, a. e.22, letter to the Ministry of Construction, Ljubljana, 18.3.1946.

12) SI AS 1926 Luka Kramolc, t. e.3, a. e.22, undated manuscript bearing the title "Žrtve nacifašizma" (Victims of Nazi-Fascism), SI AS 1926 Luka Kramolc, t. e.3, a. e.22, certificate, 31.5.1949.

13) SI AS 1926 Luka Kramolc, t. e. 3, a. e. 22, appeal to the Housing Commission in Ljubljana, 1. 11. 1948.



aggravated socio-political situation in the initial postwar years and the demonization of all those who had left their homeland during that time and, almost as a rule, also their relatives. Yet Ted, or rather Božidar, Kramolc was not part of any collaborationist circles; on the contrary, available sources point to him being part of the liberal-oriented middle class and a member of the Sokol gymnastics group, which leaned towards partisan resistance against the occupying forces. The fact of the matter is, though, that the war, with its devastating vortex of violence, escalated tensions in society and strained interpersonal relations to the extreme. As a result, the decision to leave the war-fueled atmosphere came to fruition in the young aspiring artist, leaving behind the destruction and starting a new life somewhere else.

The scars of wartime destruction

After the war, the Kramolc brothers stayed in Austrian Carinthia despite their father's protests and his repeated calls for them to return to their homeland. Due to his sons' postwar defection, Luka Kramolc experienced problems at work, did not get a travel permit to visit his relatives in Austrian Carinthia, and at the same time was also awarded a lower pension.¹⁴ In 1948, he and his wife were evicted from their three-room apartment by the housing commission for "complicity in defection." For more than a decade, Luka Kramolc lodged in the chemistry room of the high school where he taught, while his wife Marija huddled up in the storage room of a smaller apartment where two other families lived.¹⁵ Even earlier, in the summer of 1947, Ted's uncle Leon Kavčnik, economist and columnist, was sentenced at a politically staged trial, the so-called Nagode trial (Jeraj, Melik *passim*), under suspicion of spying for the Western forces. His parents' and relatives' difficult situation quickly determined Ted Kramolc's extremely critical attitude towards the postwar situation in Slovenia, especially towards the socialist government.

Once he and his brother managed to escape past the Karawank mountain range, which had defined the border between Yugoslavia and Austria since 1920 (carrying over to present day Slovenia), they first found lodging with their father's sister Brigita Onič. It was her in-laws who later assisted them in migrating to Canada. Even though Ted did have the status of a displaced person, he found himself in a unique position as the relative of Carinthian Slovenes in Austria and an artist.¹⁶ Compared to a large number of refugees in Austrian Carinthia, he enjoyed a number of privileges. Among

14) SI AS 1926, Luka Kramolc, t. e.1, a. e.4; "Luka Kramolc," *Obrazi slovenskih pokrajin* (The Visages of Slovenian Landscapes) (Available at: <https://www.obrazislovenskihpokrajin.si/oseba/kramolc-luka/>).

15) SI AS 1926 Luka Kramolc, t. e.3, a. e.22, complaint draft, undated, 1955.

16) NUK, Collection of manuscripts, Ted Kramolc, letter to Boga Pretnar and Željko Kozinc, Toronto, 12.12.2004.



them were income from the artworks he sold and a considerable degree of mobility, yet this did not come without its own stigma.

I felt wonderful there. They were friendly, good people, y'know. And then I held another exhibition with that young Austrian woman. She was a great graphic artist. We held a joint exhibition. I was invited to her home so we could draw and paint together inside in the warmth, and so forth. Of course, word came out in the "Lager" ... amongst Slovenes ... that I have a ... "He's got himself a German minx." [laughter] Minx [sarcastic, author's note]. Holy God!

Kramolc's distance not only from the refugee community in Austria but also from the organized Slovenian community in Canada is relatively well known (cf. Jurak, 352). His attitudes towards collective forms of socializing and association, which were supposed to facilitate living abroad but which he began to experience as confining and reactionary, often bleed into his literary characters as well. The restrained attitude also came from the other side: I noticed that mention of Kramolc's name on several occasions elicited a rather meaningful silence among Slovenian Canadians.

And back then there were no courses ... They didn't help you become Canadian. What does that mean? It means you have to get used to the Canadian milieu, that you have to learn English. And of course, this was perfect for those so-called leaders ... Gather your sheep together on your meadow there, y'know, build a fence around it. "We sure are Slovenians!" "Yes, Christ sakes! Of course we are! But not your type." And that all came with those blessings of theirs. I said: "What blessings? I'll give you blessings! Don't give me that shit with those blessings!" But that's how it goes ... Oh, that was ... "Oh, you can't say that!" "I'm a free man, I'm in a free country! I can say any goddamn thing I want!" "But you're not a real Slovene then." Because a real Slovenian must always kneel and keep his head down, right. "Fuck you, pardon me!" And: "Where do you belong?" [laughs] "What do you mean where? Nowhere." Oh god! ... "Nowhere?! Are you no longer Slovenian?" I said: "Well, fuck off ..."

Despite his distaste towards putting all that is Slovenian on a pedestal without discrimination, something he rejected as "ethnic crap,"¹⁷ Ted Kramolc always felt himself a Slovene as well, and contributed a large degree of his creative attention to Slovenian culture. For an artist who was looking for his own ways of expression and did so in a direct, freedom-loving way, any relationship with rigid definitions of any kind was deemed unacceptable. In cosmopolitan Toronto, he was able to develop his creativity, especially in terms of the fine arts, independently of the Slovenian community; he managed to build a social network comprising Canadians of different

17) From the author's research diary, Toronto, 22.4.2012.



ethnic origins. Because he wanted to leave the tragic war behind following his arrival in Canada, the intrusion of past disputes into everyday life perturbed him all the more, especially those concerning the label of “Slovenianness.”

There was this one group here in Toronto, five or six women. If you went to visit, the phone was ringing constantly. Blablablabla ... That’s all it was. Blabbering on, y’know. And she got together with him, and then he did that ... Niko said: “You all need a psychiatrist ... maybe it’s too late.” Oh, God ... Well, you might find that a bit blown out of proportion. It’s not. It was even worse! And one time my wife, she was more man than I was ... she said: “Why do I need your company?! It’s just gossip.” Like, who is a spy for Tito, and who is this, and that ... I said: “Why don’t you go and just go to hell?! Who cares?!” First off, there is the ocean, which is not exactly a puddle, and then there is the land, six or seven thousand miles to Ljubljana. Who gives a shit? “Oooh, about you... what they say about you is probably true. You are no longer Slovenian.” And I said, “You know what. Maybe I’m a Slovenian who hasn’t lost all his brains, like you!”

Although Kramolc’s labelling of his Slovenian compatriots with madness or neuroticism may seem inappropriate, even offensive, one must recognize that his views are consistent with some research on the topic. Slovenian psychiatrist Jurij Zalokar, who worked as an ethnic psychiatrist for Yugoslavs in Melbourne between 1986 and 1989, observed that the proportion of psychological problems among those immigrants is noticeably higher than among the rest of the population (Zalokar 1990, 1994 *passim*).¹⁸ The aspects of traumatization were also seriously considered when Canada’s postwar immigration policy was being drafted, since many of its authors were professionals in the fields of psychology and psychiatry (Iacovetta, 52). It was not without reason that Canadian leaders saw the Europeans emerging from the devastating war and difficult postwar conditions as fearful, vulnerable, potentially explosive and self-destructive newcomers in need of leadership and control (*ibid.*).

Reflections

Although Kramolc devoted most of his writing attention to refugees and emigration, both are inextricably linked to his perception of the war – and, as already evidenced, also to others’ perception of him during and after the war. Despite the fact that his departure from home, at least at first glance, came down to a voluntary decision

18) They suffered, among other things, from difficulties making themselves understood, problems with entering new social circles and new behavioural norms, values, and customs, as well as economic problems. The postwar immigrants from Slovenia were primarily from rural areas but found themselves in urban settings.



(he was not, for example, expelled or persecuted), it was after all the result of a compromise that in turn filled him with a host of internal conflicts (Lucassen and Lucassen, 11–14). In an interview with Anne Urbančič, he recalled that, as a young man, he experienced his homeland as having betrayed him, which pushed him into a position of problematic displacement (Urbančič, 41). The decision to go elsewhere strained relations with his primary family and imbued him with feelings of guilt. He revealed this tellingly in an autobiographical short story entitled “Whiskey Sour,” in which father and son confront each other over a drink during their meeting in Canada after decades of separation (Kramolc 2004, 33–38).

A unique periodization takes shape with regard to each individual’s war experience, the temporal arc of which does not end with a formal ceasefire or peace conference. On the contrary, the experience of war, marked by frustration, anger, disappointment, helplessness, shame, fear and physical consequences, stretches deep into the postwar period and often determines a person’s entire life (Levi 1986, 2003, *passim*; Pahor, *passim*). The war experience in an individual’s life bears another characteristic that merits further attention. It is seldom possible to establish a framework around war without shoehorning it according to the dominant views of the warring parties, which themselves usually model historical narratives (Verginella, Volk, Colja, *passim*). A consistent historiography of wartime also assumes there exists an awareness of the special nature of the sources that directly bear witness to the war, as they often reflect the polarization of society, determined by deception, lies and the demonization of the opponent. The same applies to postwar depictions of war, themselves strongly defined by dominant ideological-political premises. A critical biographical treatment, embedded within the complexity of the historical context, may offer a beneficial epistemological corrective to the synthetic historical accounts of wartime, taking into account the awareness of the multiplicity of war experiences. As I have attempted to show based on the available material, Kramolc’s experience of war is one that would be completely distorted by molding it into one of the dominant (post)war narratives.

Even though Kramolc never forgot the war and the postwar era, he blanketed them with his involvement in Canadian everyday life over time. In particular, he wrote relatively little about the war era, and even then, in a rather fragmented manner (Jurić Pahor, 52–53). He doubtlessly used the “pact of silence” (Rosenthal, *passim*) to refer to memory episodes that were difficult to verbalize, especially since certain perspectives reveal how formative they truly were for him. What is more, he returned to the idea of an autobiographical novel later in life, in which he would connect the fate of emigration with the time of his youth. In his last literary “interplay of memory and experience” (Summerfield, 79), which he did not succeed in realizing, he mainly sought inner catharsis and peace with his life choices, the starting point of which was the Second World War. Yet in his autobiographical attempts, one may also perceive



“a form of struggle against objectification carried out by others” (Verginella 2004, 14), something that impoverishes the richness of human experience, which itself can never be fully grasped.

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Emigration as Augmented War Experience: An (Auto)biographical Account of Ted Kramolc

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