

# Slovenian Mayors in America and the World

## A Short Overview - Part VI: Slovenian Mayors of Minnesota and outside of the United States

By Edward Gobetz

On May 11, 1994, Madeline Debevec kindly reported about this writer's forthcoming lecture on "Minnesota Slovenians: A Century and a Half of Their Contributions." On June 22, 1984, her husband Jim Debevec, editor and publisher of *American Home* (*Ameriška Domovina*) newspaper published "Salute to Minnesota Slovenians," together with some panels of a comprehensive exhibit by our Slovenian Research Center at Iron Range Museum and Research Center in Chisholm, Minnesota (see insert).

Indeed, Slovenian contributions to Minnesota would deserve a separate book, something that this writer discussed with Veda Ponikvar, the prominent Slovenian editor and civic leader in Minnesota, and a few other leading Minnesota Slovenians. We had the needed materials but, unfortunately, no financial resources and no book publisher, since publishers are usually interested in profits which can be generated only by high numbers of books printed and sold, or with help of government, foundations or other subsidies where smaller nations or relatively small ethnic groups are at a distinct disadvantage.

Yet, it is undeniable that many of the very first churches, schools, and orphanages in Minnesota were built by Slovenian missionaries. Bishop Frederic Baraga (1797-1868) labored on an enormous Great Lakes territory of over 80,000 square miles, including Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota and some areas of bordering Canada. An amazingly capable linguist, he mastered, in addition to his native Slovenian, also German, French, English, Latin, and the native Indian languages. He authored encyclicals, prayer books, catechisms, grammars and dictionaries in native languages of his beloved Indians. Indeed, more than a century after Baraga's death, Minnesota Historical Society republished Baraga's *A Dictionary of the Ojibwa Languages*, stating in John D. Nichol's Foreword to the Reprint Edition: "Bishop Baraga's *Dictionary of the Ojibwa Language* in 1853 and the companion *Theoretical and Practical Grammar of the Ojibwa Language* of 1850 are enduring monuments to missionary linguistics." We may also note that the Vatican's *Enciclopedia Cattolica* (1949, page 795) describes Baraga as "one of the greatest missionaries of North America in modern times." He is also an official candidate of the Catholic Church for beatification.

Due to space limitations let us only briefly mention James Trobec (Bishop of Saint Cloud, 1897-1914); and Msgr. Joseph Buh, subject of a comprehensive biographical study *Masinaigans: The Little Book*, by Bernard Coleman and Verona LaBud (North Central Publishing Co., Saint Paul, Minnesota, 1972). He was the "Founder of the Diocese of Duluth" (pages 160-235). Francis Pirc, together with Baraga promoted peace and Indian languages and also introduced higher levels of horticulture and agriculture; the Minnesota town of Pierz has been named after him (see William Furlan, *In Charity Unfeigned: The Life of Father Francis X, Pierz*, 1952, Diocese of St. Cloud, 270 pages). Dr. Bernard Locnikar in 1890s became the abbot of St. John's Abbey and president of St. John's College (later University) in Collegeville, Minnesota (see Gobetz, *Slovenian Heritage*, Vol. I, SRCA, Inc., 1980, pages 126-134).

A century and a few decades later, the prominent Oman family gave America Bishop James Rausch, who in 1970's gained national prominence as a very influential general secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United States Catholic Conference. His aunt, Sister Mary Anastasia O.S.F., was elected in 1942 Mother General of the Franciscan Sisters of Immaculate Conception and became a prolific builder of schools, hospitals, and nursing homes in Minnesota, while Fr. Daniel Ohmann, M.M., appeared on the cover of *Maryknoll* magazine (January 1968) for having introduced solar cookers to East Africa. Msgr. John Oman, former pastor of St. Lawrence Parish and a columnist for *Ameriška Domovina*, was a distant relative.

We also collected scores of dossiers of documents on prominent Slovenian Minnesota industrialists, businessmen, architects, apiculturists, scholars, inventors, champions in various sports, and physicians, including two natives of Chisholm, Dr. Leonard K. Lovshin, former head of the Department of Internal Medicine at the famous Cleveland Clinic and past president of the American Association of Medical Clinics (see Gobetz, *Slovenian Heritage*, pages 242-246); and Dr. James Pluth, Professor of Surgery and Head of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery (1978-1986) at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, and in the 1990s, also chair and co-chair of the Department of Surgery at Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale, Arizona. He was selected as one of the nation's best heart surgeons in 1996 and 1997. We can also proudly add to the list of Slovenian achievers in Minnesota Ludwig Andolsek, U.S. Civil Service Commissioner, and influential politicians, such as Congressmen John Blatnik and James Oberstar and, currently, Senator Amy Klobuchar, sometimes discussed as a possible Democratic candidate for vice president or president of the United States. Her father Jim Klobuchar, born to Slovenian immigrant parents in Ely, Minnesota, was a prominent journalist for the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis for three decades and also wrote columns for the *Christian Science Monitor*, in addition to being the author of over twenty books. With this proud record of Slovenian contributions to Minnesota, we are, of course, not surprised by the large number of Slovenian mayors in the North Star State whom we will now briefly discuss in this article.

As far as we could establish, Jernej (Yerney) Pirc (or Bartholomew Pirc (1826-1896), the nephew of the leading missionary Franc Pirc, came to America



in 1854 and in 1855 settled west of St. Cloud in Stearns County, which was mostly wilderness at that time, without railways and with very few roads. Fortunately, his uncle managed to pacify and befriend the rebellious Chippewa Indians. Thus, in 1866, Jernej Pirc (Pirz) became mayor of Eden Lake and appraiser of school properties and, in 1867, Stearns County commissioner. He also served as Justice of the Peace. Between 1867 and 1874, he was superintendent of Stearns County Schools. In 1872, Pirz was elected state representative of Minnesota, with the seat in St. Paul, and was re-elected in 1874 and 1876. In 1881, he was again elected County Commissioner and served until 1896, the year of his death. A builder of roads, bridges and schools, always ready to help the needy, he was the first known Slovenian career politician and public servant in Minnesota, foreshadowing such modern Slovenian political stars as Congressmen John Blatnik, James Oberstar and Senator Amy Klobuchar a century or more later. This more recent period is also marked by an amazing number of Slovenian mayors of many Minnesota towns.

Thus, Dr. Jack P. "Doc" Grahek was born in 1911 to Slovenian parents Jacob Grahek and Katherine, nee Muhvich, in Ely, Minnesota, as the oldest of their six children.

He grew up in Ely, a town with a population of about 5,000, located about 100 miles, or 160 kilometers, north of Duluth. He graduated from Ely High School in 1928, attended Vermillion Community College and Marquette Medical School in Milwaukee; did his internship at St. Mary's Hospital in Duluth and opened his medical office in Ely in 1940, practicing medicine in his native town until mid-1979. He delivered more than 2,500 babies and cared for countless Ely residents. A man of the people, popular in Ely and Minnesota at large, Dr. Grahek decided to run for mayor of Ely and was elected in 1954 on the platform of building a new hospital. In the mid-1950's, Dr. H.N. Sutherland, another local physician, also joined him challenging the residents of Ely with the idea to build a new hospital. Mr. Abe Bloomenson, an Elyite who had moved to Duluth, encouraged these proposals by contributing \$100,000 to the building fund, while Dr. Grahek, the City Council, local labor unions and citizens at large, then introduced a \$550,000 bond issue which was approved in 1955. The new hospital, named Ely Bloomenson Community Hospital, was dedicated on February 22, 1958. As the area's largest healthcare center, it still proudly serves Ely and surrounding communities at the time of this writing (2019). To a considerable extent, it is also a monument to the energetic and popular Mayor and Doctor Jack Grahek.

When Dr. Grahek died in 2001 at age 90, *The Messabi Daily News* of November 14 reported: "He practiced medicine in Ely for 40 years, retiring July 1, 1979. In 1954 he was elected Mayor of Ely and served as mayor for 27 years. During his political career he brought to Ely a hospital, a sewage treatment plant, multiple public housing facilities and an airport that is among the finest ever seen in a community of 5,000.

His accomplishments and awards were innumerable but included the C.C. Ludwig Award for Outstanding Municipal Service, Outstanding Minnesota Citizen Award, Outstanding Civic Service Award and the Arrowhead Community College Distinguished College Service Award. He was honored in 1977 by the citizens of Ely with the J.P. Grahek Recognition Day. ... In 1987 he was appointed unanimously to the Board of Regents of the University of Minnesota. Most recently, Ely again honored him by declaring May 1, 1998, Dr. J.P. Grahek Day."

There were several other mayors in Minnesota, reported to be of Slovenian or partly Slovenian descent, whom, unfortunately we could not research as thoroughly as we would like to. Thus, in addition to Dr. Grahek, in Ely alone there were at least the following Slovenian mayors: Anton Golob, Frank Jenko, Joe Koschak, John Koschak, John Kapsch, Matt Marolt, Jack Peshel, Joseph Pucel and George Brozich.

As early as the 1930s, Rudolph Strukel was mayor of Chisholm, followed more recently by at least Frank Furlan (also a member of the Regents of University of Minnesota), and John A. Champa. Peter Kerze served as mayor of Eveleth in the late 1960s; Anton Lopp was elected in 1940 the first mayor of the City of Gilbert; Don Miklich, Sr., was mayor of Tower (1967-1969); and Terry Hren,



Dr. Jack P. Grahek (1911-2001), mayor of Ely, Minnesota (1954-1981)



U.S. Vice President Hubert Humphrey, with three of his Slovenian Minnesota friends in 1965 (from left) U.S. Congressman John Blatnik; Ms. Veda Ponikvar, editor and publisher; and Ludwig Andolsek, U.S. Civil Service Commissioner



mayor of Norton, Minnesota.

While we did our best to get on record all Slovenian or partly Slovenian mayors in Minnesota, the list is undoubtedly incomplete and may need further revisions. All things considered, Slovenians of Minnesota deserve to be applauded for their many outstanding contributions to Minnesota and the United States.

What about Slovenian mayors in other countries? Slovenian minorities under Austria and Italy have elected an impressive number of mayors, especially in towns with substantial Slovenian populations. They, however, represent a challenge for local researchers, master's degree theses or dissertations for students, journalists, librarians, civic leaders, etc. To the extent that this has not yet been done, minorities under Austria, Italy and Hungary should, of course, also systematically document and publicize in at least Slovenian and the languages of the respective dominant group all other significant contributions by their members, in religion, politics, scholarship, various professions, in business, tourism and sports (e.g. Slovenian skiing champions and Olympians in Carinthia), etc.

While Slovenians in Canada can be very proud of the late Archbishop of Toronto Cardinal Aloysius Ambrozic and of most impressive achievements in industry, business, music, construction, sports and other areas, their achievements in politics need further study. Dr. Branka Lapajne of Toronto, the best Slovenian genealogist in North America, in addition to being a capable author and a past editor, has discovered so far known Slovenian mayors in Canada. Mark Lovshin was elected to council in 2000, as deputy mayor in 2003 and mayor in 2006. Dr. Lapajne also kindly sent us an article by Greg Davis, published on-line in *Global News* of December 13, 2017, which reports that "Lovshin, the mayor of Hamilton Township and a long time county councilor, will serve his second term as Northumberland County warden after being sworn in at a ceremony in Cobourg."

We also consulted several knowledgeable Slovenians in Australia, yet so far, no Slovenian mayors were reported there, although this writer was privileged, in 1998 on his Australian lecture tour, to meet in Sydney a very gracious host Milivoj or Misha Lajovic, the first non-Anglo-Saxon and the first immigrant (federal) senator of Australia. We wrote extensively about him and later, with his approval, secured a copy of his Australian Oral History Project biography. We also wrote about the stellar political career of Tanya Joan Plibersek, born in Sydney to Slovenian immigrant parents, who has been a member of the House of Representatives since 1998 and is a star of the Australian Labor Party. I have long admired as an exceptionally dedicated public servant Alfred Breznik, former Honorary Consul of the Republic of Slovenia in Sydney and president of the Emona Instruments, a leading high-tech engineering company. He was one of several sources I consulted about Slovenian mayors "down under." While Australian Slovenians shine in architecture, engineering, industry, business, classical music, the arts, and politics on the highest level, no Slovenian Australian mayors have so far been discovered in our research.

Similarly, I asked several Slovenian leaders in Argentina where Slovenians can justly be proud of a Catholic archbishop and two bishops and are admired for their accomplishments in maintaining strong, well-organized Slovenian communities. Their achievements shine in numerous fields, including nationally and internationally recognized scholarship, architecture, classical music, alpinism, etc. Argentine Slovenians also contributed Cardinal Franc Rode, former archbishop of Ljubljana, Slovenia, a prolific scholar and author and current member of the Vatican Curia; and Pedro Opeka, the legendary missionary and an internationally known humanitarian giant who has helped over half a million of the poorest of the poor in Madagascar. Often compared with Mother Teresa, he has repeatedly been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, while Pope Francis has expressed his intention to visit Pedro's widely admired Akamasoa villages, beautifully built and maintained by formerly dehumanized "garbage" people. (Among numerous books in many languages about Pedro, see the English edition of J.M. Silveyra, *Padre Pedro: Apostle of Hope*, Foreword by Cardinal Franc Rode, College Station, Texas: Virtual Bookworm Publishing, Inc., 2012).

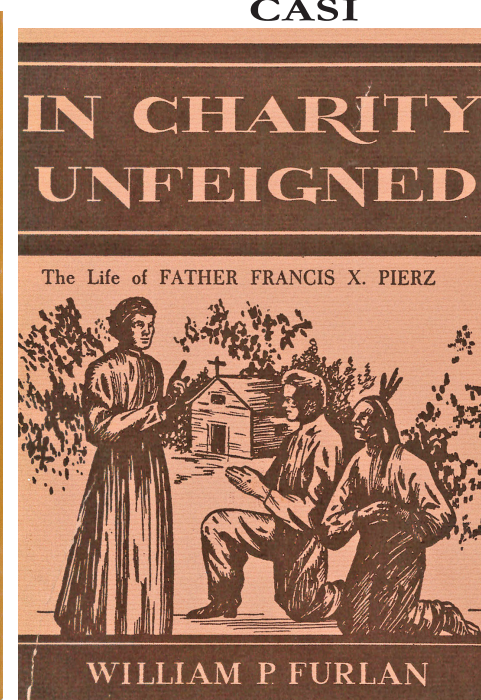
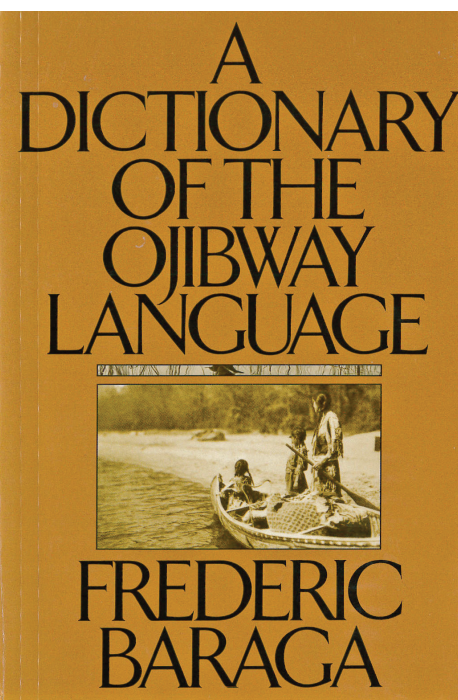
Yet, I could so far get no information on Slovenian mayors in Argentina. It seems that politics was not particularly attractive to Argentine Slovenians. As a highly respected respondent stated, "Politics is pervaded with corruption and we Slovenians stay out of it" (an attitude similar to that of many Slovenians in native Slovenia).

It may be puzzling why, by contrast, so many Slovenians in America have become mayors of many large cities (Cleveland, Ohio; Indianapolis, Indiana; Portland, Oregon) and of scores of smaller towns. My own hypothesis would ascribe this to American genius in modern times in successfully integrating all ethnic groups. In simpler terms, the American political system, too, is characterized as being very pragmatic, with a strong competitive orientation. As new immigrants arrive, both Democrats and Republicans try to enlist them as their potential voters, since the number of voters decides whether they or the rival party will gain political power. On the other hand, ethnic groups soon realize that it is also to their advantage to be politically recognized and thus become integrated first on the local, municipal level. American parties, in turn, nominate and support those candidates who they believe would have the best chance to lead their party to victory, increasingly regardless of a candidate's ethnicity.

Whatever the explanation, Slovenian Americans have been very successful also in politics, beginning on the local level with an impressive number and performance of Slovenian American mayors. Indeed, should we add all populations of American municipalities led by Slovenian or partly-Slovenian mayors, the



**Left:** Bishop Frederic Baraga (1797-1868), a towering figure of the American Catholic Church, called by the Vatican's *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, 1949: "One of the greatest missionaries of North America in modern times. **Center:** Cover of Frederic Baraga's *A Dictionary of the Ojibway Language*, Minnesota Historical Society, 1992, called an "enduring monument to missionary linguistics" **Right:** Cover of *In Charity Unfeigned: The Life of Father Francis X. Pierz*, by William P. Furlan, 1952



Ely Bloomenson Community Hospital, built with strong support of Mayor Grahek, was dedicated on February 22, 1958.



A view of the town of Mores, in Sardinia, where Dušan Simsič served as mayor.

sum total would undoubtedly exceed several times the total population of that of native Slovenia, which is only about two million.

Thanks to Ivo Jevnikar, an outstanding Slovenian journalist, writer, editor and civic leader in Trieste-Trst, we can today report also on the Slovenian mayor of Mores on the Italian Island of Sardegna, or Sardinia, as reported by Andrej Černic in *Novi glas* of October 23, 2014 (a copy of which Jevnikar kindly shared with us). Černic, in turn, mentions his indebtedness to a report by Dorica Makuc who had reported to KCLB about Slovenians in Sardinia. The latter had been members of Slovenian minorities living in Italy who were mobilized into the Italian army and sent in selected battalions to the Italian island of Sardinia which was of great strategic significance during the Second World War. One of mobilized soldiers, Lojze Pavlič, who had earlier been an assistant of the noted Slovenian composer Vinko Vodopivec, even established a Slovenian singing group in Sardinia. When, after 1943, the victorious Americans had heard them singing Slovenian songs, they invited them to move together with them to France where Pavlič and his singers entertained American army units, especially the wounded soldiers in hospitals.

Some Slovenians who had been brought to Sardinia as Italian soldiers have married local women and decided to remain in Sardinia. Dorica Makuc, a dedicated researcher and writer, accompanied a male singing society *Scala* from Gabrije on one of its tours to the island of Sardinia. There, she also discovered the fascinating story of Dušan Simsič. He was one of those former soldiers who remained in Sardinia and was even elected mayor of Mores, a small town of about 2,000 residents, located in the Province of Sassari, about 159 kilometers or 93 miles north of Sardinia's capital city of Cagliari. Sardinia, or Sardinia, has been a self-governing region of Italy since 1948. Although Mayor Simsič remained in Mores for the rest of his life, he has never forgotten his Slovenian roots and heritage. On his 90th birthday, a male singing group from Gabrije and another one from Doberdob, both relatively close to the village of his birth, visited him and he was delighted to listen to the Slovenian songs that he had learned so long ago as a young member of the Slovenian minority under Italy. As some Slovenians like to say: "Kri ni voda! Blood isn't water!"

(God willing, in the next issue we will complete the series on Slovenian mayors by introducing the Slovenian mayor of one of the leading capital cities of Europe.)