

The heart of Slovenia



by Jonathan Knott

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This is the story of a walk. A walk through landscape, language and history into the heart, even into the very soul, of Slovenia. Guest contributor **Jonathan Knott** reports on how Slovenians mark the anniversary of the death of their national poet France Prešeren.

ABOVE: Walkers cross open land between villages of the Kašarija, with Slovenia's highest mountain, Triglav, dominating the skyline (photo by Polona Kus).

I was told to wrap up well, and I'm glad I did. The bright sunlight belies a bitter wind. It may be a national holiday, but plenty of Slovenians are up early today. So the streets of Žirovnica are already busy.

The eighth day of February is a holiday in Slovenia, commemorating the death of France Prešeren. Each year on this day, people from across the country gather for a ceremony at Prešeren's birthplace in Vrba, one of a cluster of villages that are collectively dubbed *Kašarija*. The entire population of these communities amounts

*Sunrise now gilds the threefold peaks unbowed
Of Carniola's grey and snowbound height.*

From France Prešeren, 'Baptism at the Savica' (1935)

to only about 4000 but this small municipality — officially called Žirovnica, after the biggest of the ten villages — has long punched above its weight. It is the font of Slovenia's cultural history, providing not just the national poet but four other

key figures.

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With hundreds of Slovenians, I will be walking to Vrba along a route that passes the old homes of all these figures, and the landscapes that inspired them. Accompanying me is Polona Kus, who teaches at the primary school in Zabreznica, adjacent to Žirovnica. We follow the path between the two villages

to the school, in front of which are erected busts of the five men.

The oldest figure, wearing a wide-brimmed hat, is Anton Janša (1734–1773), who has arguably had the biggest global impact of all for his groundbreaking work in apiculture. Next to Janša, in a high starched collar, is Matija Čop (1797–1835), a linguist and literary scholar who mentored Prešeren (our walk began at his old house in Žirovnica). Over to the right are the two most modern members of the group, their essential decency shining through: Fran Saleški Finžgar (1871–1962) and Janez Jalen (1891–1966). Both men were Catholic priests, writers and social activists.

In the centre, in every sense, is Prešeren (1800–1849). He refused to sit for any painting, but representations all agree on certain characteristics: he wears the formal

attire appropriate to his legal profession, but his flowing dark locks and unfocused, deep gaze are those of the archetypal Romantic poet. And evident too is a morose expression. Prešeren's life was beset by frustrations which led him to drink heavily and die disappointed. And yet without him Slovenia would probably not exist today.

THE GATHERING

We are not far from the setting for Prešeren's epic poem *Baptism at the Savica* (*Krst pri Savici*), and his verses capture the sparse clarity of the landscape (see quote above). Just visible in a distant haze are the triple peaks of Triglav, Slovenia's highest mountain, and towering right behind the village school is Stol, unblemished snow bleeding down its crevices.

On the other side of Stol is Austria. The ridge of those mountains seems a natural border. In Prešeren's day, it merely marked the boundary between two provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Slovenes were a minority living here — then the Duchy of Carniola — and dispersed through Carinthia, lower Styria, and in villages on the *karst* hills around Trieste.

RIGHT: Dressed as France Prešeren and Ana Jelovšek, announcers welcome visitors to Vrba (photo by Polona Kus).



On the imperial maps produced in distant Vienna, Žirovnica was shown as Scheraunitz, and the little village of Vrba, where Prešeren was born, was rendered as Velden. Official business was conducted in German: the most elevated use of Slovene was for the K&K emperors to talk to their horses (the Lipica stud, home to the famous Lipizzaner breed, is in the western part of Slovenia).

Prešeren took this ‘peasant tongue’ and turned it into something capable of expressing the most sophisticated thoughts and subtle emotions.

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He crafted for his people a national identity and the literary language in which to express and celebrate that identity. After his death in 1849, Prešeren became a figure around whom Slovene nationalists could rally. Although he never once called for an independent Slovenia, when

this finally did emerge in 1991, it’s no exaggeration to say that Prešeren more than any other person was responsible.

Adorning the hallway of the school in Zabreznica are pictures drawn by Polona Kus’ pupils. They depict Prešeren himself, the village of

Walkers gather for tea outside the old house of Fran Saleški Finžgar (photo by Polona Kus).



Vrba and there is a picture of a book showing one of Prešeren’s poems, *Povodni mož*. It is the story of a beautiful Ljubljana girl who rejects all her suitors before eventually being seduced by the dangerous water spirit (*povodni mož* in Slovene). It is a tragedy which leads eventually to the heroine downing.

“They are too young to read most of his poems, but that is one of the easier ones,” says Polona.

Children are selling local honey and cakes they have made, and there is more tea. In the library I see a battered copy of a novel by Father Finžgar: the children are supposed to read one of his books every year, but they sometimes complain that he is boring.

A little distance from the school is Janša’s old house, with a replica hive outside in the traditional style that he pioneered: a stack of small wooden boxes with painted fronts, often displaying a less than politically correct humour (one popular motif shows the devil sharpening a woman’s tongue). Janša started out as a painter but his remarkable success as a beekeeper led to his appointment as the first official imperial apiarist by the Empress Maria Teresa in Vienna. His writings are revered today, and the Carniolan bee, native to Slovenia, is likewise prized across the world for its gentleness and industry: we could even say for its typically Slovene characteristics.

The *Carniolan Bee* (*Kranjska čbelica*) was also the name of the literary journal which first published Prešeren’s poems, including the famous *A Farewell to Youth*, in 1830, when the poet had come to Ljubljana after his legal studies in Vienna.

The occasion was a key salvo within an intellectual dispute known as the ‘Ljubljana ABC war’, a linguistic argument whose ramifications affected fundamental questions of nationhood. Conservatives championed a new script, called *Metelčica*. Its advocates claimed it would formalise the Slovene language, but only as a vehicle for folk songs and elementary teaching purposes. If Slovenes wanted to progress in society, they spoke German and studied in Vienna or Prague (Ljubljana University was not founded until 1922). Others wanted

to unite Slovenes with other Slavic nations speaking a common language: Prešeren was entreated to support the movement for merging the Slovene and Croat languages into 'Illyrian'.

The position of the group around the *Carniolan Bee* was at once more cosmopolitan and more radically nationalistic than either of these. Supported by Čop and Miha Kastelic, editor of the *Carniolan Bee*, Prešeren, using the old Bohoričica script, borrowed literary forms from western European traditions and words from other southern Slavic languages to mould a uniquely Slovene identity, balancing his nation culturally in the same precarious position it sits geographically: at a crossroads.



St Mark's church, Vrba (photo by Polona Kus).

THE WALK

The cold is beginning to bite and it is time for our procession to move on. We walk down past Breznica's church and graveyard to a First World War memorial displaying the understated elegance which is the hallmark of the Slovene modernist architect Jože Plečnik. Looking south, our view comprises the distant mount Triglav, the spire of St Mark's church in Vrba, and beyond it St Martin's on the shore of Lake Bled. Plečnik's stamp lies indelibly on today's Ljubljana, but despite the prettiness of the Slovenian capital, the country's essence is more strongly evinced in this characteristic Slovenian duality of rustic simplicity and natural grandeur. Catholic though the country may be, the fabric of Christianity overlies an older pagan attachment to nature.

Bled, with Slovenia's only island in the middle of its eponymous lake, has long captivated the imagination, and many have wanted to call it their own. Prešeren described it as the "image of Paradise", and the first monument to the poet, other than his grave in Kranj, was built here in 1883. The memorial featured a quote from Prešeren's *Baptism at the Savica*, a story of the Slavic resistance to Germanic Christianity in the eighth century: the Slav leader Črtomir makes the defiant claim, as the Christian invaders approach, that "most of the Earth belongs to the sons of *Slava*" (that is, to the Slavs).

Swiss entrepreneur Arnold Rikli brought modern tourism to Bled in 1854 by running health retreats, erecting signs in German for his wealthy patrons — and it is said the Slovene monument to Prešeren was positioned in order to needle Rikli on his daily walk to work.

Rikli's incursions, though, were tame by the standards of the twentieth century, when Bled was a regional headquarters during the Nazi occupation. The town of Begunje, adjacent to the Kašarija, hosted a Gestapo prison, where over four years 12,000 were incarcerated and 850 killed. Heinrich Himmler wanted to replace the church of the Virgin Mary on Bled's island with a temple to Wodin, making it a centre for his planned Nazi religion.

Slovene partisans resisted the Nazis, first as a nationalist coalition and then under the umbrella of the communist party and led by Marshal Josip Broz Tito, Yugoslavia's future leader (who as leader of Yugoslavia had his holiday villa at Bled). Prešeren's death began to be commemorated officially in 1944 in liberated territory, just as the nationalist movement was being subsumed into a broader south Slavic one. This was a familiar pattern: Slovenes can rarely survive alone, but just as some greater power threatens to dominate them, a spirit of independence emerges, drawing on a pride in their language and the beauty of their country. It follows the model of the Bled Prešeren

monument, and recalls the spirited cultural agitation of Prešeren's poetry.

Between Breznica and Doslovče, where Finžgar was born, is an open stretch of hillside called Rebro, the setting for some of Jalen's stories, which describe Slovene rural life. As we stop to look over the valley of the River Sava, Polona pours some more tea from a flask, adding a splash of alcohol.

"I don't think anyone comes on this walk without having a little schnapps," she says.

We walked past an old fruit press earlier, and remembering that this kind of fruit-derived spirit is popular in other Balkan countries, I mention the name *rakija*.

"That is what they drink in Croatia," says Maja, our other walking companion.

There is more schnapps and more tea steaming in the cold air as a crowd gathers by a low-eaved wooden hut next to Finžgar's old house, and a few people wearing orange jackets begin to sing in harmony. The scene could easily be Austrian. But were we to travel a couple of hours south west, the stone villages and burnt hills of the Slovenian *karst* would look equally Italian. And a similar distance in the opposite direction, the endless flat plains have more in common with Hungary than with any other part of Slovenia. In fact, if you wanted to rotate Europe on its axis, you might well

A bowl of hot *kaša* is served outside Janez Jalen's old house (photo by Polona Kus).



find this little patchwork country the best place to do so: a liminal zone where a Germanic language has already become Slavic, but where schnapps will not become *rakija* until the next border.

THE FINAL ACT

To some, Prešeren's nationalistic aspirations must have seemed like madness — but he was nothing if not master of the lost cause. He first set eyes on his unrequited love Julija Primic, the daughter of a rich Ljubljana merchant, at a church service in 1833 when she was sixteen. Her mother was highly

Holy Mass is being celebrated in the packed St. Mark's church and up the hill from Bled comes another walking party, led by veterans of Slovenia's ten-day War of Independence in 1991.

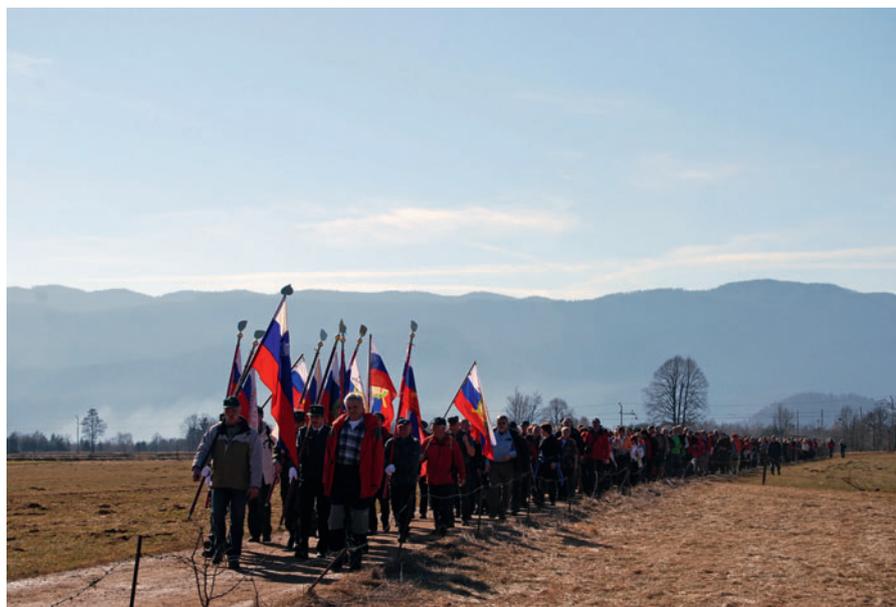
protective, and Julija apparently had no interest in him anyway. Prešeren nonetheless addressed her repeatedly through his verse: first hopefully, then in increasingly embittered laments. In a similarly hapless vein, he applied five times, each unsuccessful, to establish his own legal practice in Ljubljana. In 1846, he was finally permitted to set one up in the near-

by town of Kranj. Later that year he published his collected poems. He died in poverty three years later, convinced that his patriotic hopes — like his romantic ones — were doomed.

We reach Rodine, the easternmost village of the Kašarija where Jalen's old house is now a museum, his desk and books preserved as if he had just popped out for a walk. Outside, one of his descendants is telling the crowd about a dispute between Finžgar and Jalen conducted in the national newspaper letters pages.

Finžgar urged Jalen to make his writing more exciting: couldn't the shepherd in his story *Ovčar Marko* have broken his leg, or a wolf come and attack him? Jalen replied that in this case, Finžgar should also make some changes to his work: in the novel *Pod svobodnim soncem*, for example — which is about Irena, a virtuous half-Slovene girl living at the Byzantine court — couldn't a

RIGHT: A group of walkers, led by veterans of Slovenia's War of Independence, approaches Vrba up the hill from Bled (photo by Polona Kus).



soldier at least come and pinch the heroine's bottom?

As we are served bowls of a hot semolina-like porridge, I find out how the area got its nickname. This grain, called *kaša*, is the same food which the villagers of Rodine used to bring to the workers building the church at Breznica in the nineteenth century (during the church's construction, each village took it in turns to provide sustenance). The name Kašarji eventually came to describe people not just from Rodine, but from all ten villages, and the area itself was called Kašarija. Energised, we head to Vrba across Dežela — a flat basin just before the Sava Valley — passing horse riders and dog walkers on a historic trade route called the 'Emperor's Way', flanked by razed brown stubble.

Holy Mass is being celebrated in the packed St. Mark's church at Vrba. Up the hill from Bled comes another walking party, led by veterans of Slovenia's ten-day War of Independence in 1991. Each of the veterans carries a flag. Whole coach loads have arrived from nearby towns like Radovljica; others have come from Ljubljana and even further afield: in total, about a thousand people are now here. The veterans line up alongside a stage where a local choir named after Prešeren is singing. Next to the stage is another bust of Prešeren; in front are the flags of the European Union, of the municipality of Žirovnica and of Slovenia — with its image of Triglav against a background of red, white and blue stripes. Behind everything is the formidable mountain barrier of Stol.

A man and a woman walk to the front, dressed as Prešeren and his partner Ana Jelovšek. In Prešeren's eyes Ana was a clear second to Julija: they never married but had three children.

"Ladies and gentlemen," says the woman. "Welcome to Prešeren's Vrba."

The choir sing Prešeren's poem *Vrba*, then *Zdravljica* ('a toast') — a drinking song whose fourth verse is now the Slovenian national anthem.

Mulled wine and food is served at stalls afterwards, where I meet one of the veterans. He says that his parents lived in Istria during its 'Italianisation' under Mussolini: the Slovene national hall at Trieste was burned down and to speak Slovene was forbidden, even within one's own home.

"We are all children of Prešeren," says the 70-year-old man.

Prešeren's statue now stands in Ljubljana's central square (called of course, Prešeren Square), next to Plečnik's Triple Bridge, looking up in perpetuity at a sculpture of Julija Primic on the wall opposite. Whether the poet, ever the perennial outsider, would have wanted to be so fully co-opted by the State is an interesting question — but Prešeren did always tie his personal fortunes to those of his nation. In the second poem of his masterpiece *A Wreath of Sonnets (Sonetni venec)*, he expresses the hope that although he would by then be lying in a moss-covered tomb, his enduring verses will encourage girls of the future not to follow Julija's haughty ways:

*For all Slovenes will then dawn brighter days
And kindlier stars upon their land will gaze.* ■

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