

GOLDEN BOAT 2006

Go to any capital city and you'll find a statue of a great statesman or general in the main square. In Ljubljana you'll see a statue of Slovenia's national poet France Preseren. That tells you something about Slovenian priorities and the openness to culture there.

Following a visit to THE SOUTH last autumn of Slovenian poets and writers, two poets from THE SOUTH were invited to the *Golden Boat* Translation Workshop held in July 2006 in the Skocjan National Park and hosted by the Slovenian poet, novelist, essayist, and mountaineer Iztok Osojnik, and scholar, editor and translator Ana Jelcnikar with local poets and editors Barbara Pogacnik and Primos Cucnik also taking part. The other poets aboard the *Golden Boat* were Jouni Inkala from Finland, Simona Popescu from Romania, Barbara Siegel Carlson from the U.S and Christophe Lamiot Enos from France, plus a guest appearance from Vlado Kreslin, Slovenia's famous singer songwriter, which caused quite a stir in the little village we stayed in. We were told this was the equivalent of Bob Dylan playing a gig in Ditchling; as a result we were all treated like gods, with the very Good Old Boys whom Iztok had befriended spoiling us rotten on Slivovitz, beer, wine and the finest barbecue we've had this summer.

In stunning surroundings and sunny hot temperatures we spent a week meeting and translating one another's work, working from literal translations in French and/or English, but also in close consultation with the authors. This sparked discussion and cultural exchange at an intense level. The best way to describe it would be as 'poetry speed dating'. You'd meet a poem (and its author); invariably find yourself falling in love with it, and begin struggling to understand its subtleties and references. Then it would suddenly be time to move on to the next one and you'd be instantly immersed in a wholly different culture. In the space of a few short days we covered a vast amount of ground. Not to mention literal (not only literary) excursions to the underground caverns Skocjan is famous for and which are said to have been the inspiration for Dante's *Inferno*. There were hikes in hot sun for a view from the peaks and there was the late night carousing and sampling of sheep cheese or killer plum brandy. It was amazing, exciting, and utterly exhausting.

The week's work culminated in two readings. We performed our work in the village at Skocjan in front of the church with the inestimable Vlado and one later on in the week in the capital, Ljubljana. If we thought at first that we were the literary superstars come to hang out with the locals, we couldn't have been more wrong. The villagers of Skocjan had been collecting the folk tales of the region. Two elderly ladies were a vast repository of ribald and frightening stories telling how the caves came to be and why plum brandy makes you eventually talk peculiar (at least we think that's what they were saying). The night of our reading was also the night of a book launch in which these tales had been handsomely published. Barbara Carlson with help from Ana translated one of these stories so that we poor foreigners wouldn't feel left out.

The tales in the original Slovenian made us sit up and listen. For the elderly ladies telling them were natural performers, grimacing and gurning, gesturing like born actors, the audience chuckling away as night fell in the little square where the ancient church of Skocjan had stood for centuries, a hundred or so 'kaplanci' welcoming us and showing just what they were capable of themselves.

Skocjan was a night to treasure and we wondered what awaited us in Ljubljana.

We arrived in the capital on a balmy mid-afternoon looking forward to the next turn in the voyage of the Golden Boat. Ljubljana really is a wonderful city. A river runs through it, with willows weeping all along the banks, as if this historic capital were overjoyed to receive its visitors. We were given a fine tour by Iztok and then assembled in the Old Town for pizzas - pizzas the size of manhole covers, cheap, tasty and filling. After this we were ready to take on the world.

Suitably fortified we headed off to the South Bank of Ljubljana, the Klub Cankarjevega. This big barn of a place, a little like the Queen Elizabeth Hall or the Brighton Centre, was keyed up for our visit. Slovenian TV filmed the performance and John invited a guest from the Irish Embassy. Maria showed her prodigious skills as a linguist by addressing the audience in Slovenian, Polish and English, which delighted them all.

Maria's very touching poems about her father met with an unexpected response when it was all over. A young woman approached her and started talking about her own father and the difficulties he was facing. Then she broke down. Maria comforted her and we were all aware of the power of the poetry to move and to give voice to our inmost feelings.

We were aware of having a status far beyond the welcome afforded most poets in the UK. It seemed as if we really mattered. Our hosts certainly made us feel this all through our stay. Their energy and commitment to building a new independent Slovenia was evident in all that they did. Their journal *Apokalipsa* and their efforts as publishers, writers, cultural entrepreneurs quite took our breath away.

On the Friday morning we took off for our final excursion – a ramble through the countryside to a plateau where all of Europe lay before us like a vision of bucolic harmony, one massive land as far as the eye could see without borders, checkpoints, or war. We were on our way to a sheep farm, to sample the finest wine and cheeses known to humanity. Iztok took a call on his mobile then suddenly stopped the car about twenty miles from our destination. He got out and started bellowing at the hills round about; Iztok and the people associated with *Apokalipsa* had just heard that they had been awarded an EU grant to undertake a massive programme of work in ten other European countries.

Confirmation – if any was needed – that we had landed among Balkan artists of vision and drive, artists who are serious about promoting their country's culture but equally committed to reaching out to her neighbours, near and far. We all came away imbued

with this spirit, aware of the international dimensions to life on planet Earth, that we are all connected, that we are indeed all 'prjiatalji'*

*Friends

John O'Donoghue and Maria Jastrzebska