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THE ROLE OF IMMIGRANT ORGANISATION IN THE COMMUNITY LIFE — SERBS IN CHICAGO

Immigrant organisations decisively influenced the gathering of Serbs in Chicago and the formation of their ethnic community. These organisations also contributed to the preservation of their ethnic identity. Apart from that, they influenced the formation of the specific culture of American Serbs, as well as the affirmation of the immigrants in the wider American society.

Key words: ethnic identity, ethnic community, togetherness, segmentation

The relationship between ethnic organisations and community life is studied, in the Serbian immigrant group in Chicago (USA), in synchronic and diachronic perspective¹. Focus rests on the impact that immigrant organisations and their gatherings had in preserving and expressing the ethnic identity of different generations and waves of Serbian emigrants in Chicago. The modern concept of ethnic identity / ethnicity is employed in this paper. It is based on situational approach, and on a combination of cultural and social aspects, while emphasising both the subjective dimension and symbolic character of ethnic togetherness and diversity.

Having reviewed demographic characteristics and different kinds of immigrant organisations (benefit societies, church parishes, political societies, parish schools, choirs, folklore groups etc.), the article provides an analysis of their role in the ethnic community.

Migration of Serbs to Chicago, apart from some peculiarities, has all the features of Serbs settling in America or indeed the movement of South Slaves and Europeans to the USA. It started at the end of the nineteenth and during the first decades of the twentieth century and continues with varying intensity up to the present day. Thus there is already a fourth generation of Serbs immigrants living in this city. Migration took place in several consecutive stages, differing in time, numbers, causes, and regions of origin, education and social-economic structure.

¹ The most important data were collected during my field research in 1985 in Chicago, by the combined method of observation, participation and interviewing. Literature, statistical sources and emigrants' publications (newspapers, calendars, bulletins etc) are also used particularly for later information.

In the first decades of the 20th century, mainly for economic reasons, poor farmers migrated from the South Slav areas that had been under Austro-Hungarian rule (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lika, Kordun and other parts of Croatia) as well as from Montenegro. It was only in the thirties of that century, with the next waves of migration, that a greater number of emigrants from Serbia started to arrive.

The second wave consisted of immigration in the period immediately after World War II up to 1962. People of various professions and levels of education left their homeland for political reasons (the establishment of Communist rule in Yugoslavia). They emigrated to Chicago, that is America, all at once and in large numbers (approx. 80.000) as refugees and displaced persons on the grounds of The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 and The Refugee Relief Act of 1953.²

From 1962,³ Chicago was again the destination of emigrants, mainly economic, from Serbia proper. These were people of more suitable age group and qualification structure, among whom there were many highly qualified specialists.

The time of their arrival and differences in the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the immigrants influenced the cultural specific, habits, tendencies and interests of the Serbs in Chicago. This also influenced their adaptation, social position, life style and way of organising in the new environment, within the framework of the immigrant-ethnic community as well as society in general.

In the first wave of emigration, poor and half-educated peasants were usually the ones to leave their homeland. Without special qualifications and knowledge of English, and in search of quick earnings, they took employment as the lowest paid unqualified workers. On arrival in Chicago, they were face to face with a new environment with whose language, customs and habits they were unfamiliar. Feeling insecure and obliged to live together so that they could help one another, the first immigrants formed the first small ethnic settlements — *colonies*, in the poor quarters of the city. One of these was established by emigrants from Boka and Hercegovina in the northern part of the city, along Clybourn Street.⁴ Another sprang up in South Chicago, a small industrial town, nine miles from the centre where many foundries, steel works and other factories were to be found. The colony spread to Green Bay Street, in the vicinity of the Carnegie Steel Co., where the majority of the immigrants worked.⁵ Today South Chicago is the industrial part of the city.

The colonies however did not just keep the people together, but a wide network of different ethnic organisations were established and developed by the Serbs living in Chicago, ranging from benevolent and work groups, to religious, cultural-artistic and finally sports and political societies.

Desire for friendship, the need to solve together the numerous problems concerning housing and employment, and necessity for support in times of crisis

² M. Petrovic and J. Halpern, *Serbs*, Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, Cambridge and London 1980, 920

³ The year 1962 is taken as crucial because that year the amnesty law concerning post war political emigrants was passed in the SFR of Yugoslavia; I.Cizmic and V. Mikacic: *Neki savremeni problemi iseljennitva iz SR Hrvatske I*, Teme o iseljennitvu 1, Zagreb 1974, 80 — 90.

⁴ Spomenica SPC “Voskresenija Hristova” 1905–1955, Chicago 1955, 51–56

⁵ L. Pejović, *Prikaz naših iselejenika, Život i rad američkih Jugoslovena knj. 4*, Čikago 1939, 18–22.

(unemployment, death etc) together with the need to preserve their cultural heritage, forced our immigrants to establish first of all benevolent societies (usually called Serbian Support Association). Thus in 1887 the first Serbian immigrant organisation was founded in Chicago under the name Entertainment Club "Obilic". A few years later in 1881, the same group of immigrants founded a new organisation, The Serbo-Montenegrian support association which was soon reorganised and renamed The United Serbian Society. Apart from its national character the society also had socio-humanitarian orientation. "The members of the society in case of illness and other misfortunes, receive help from the treasury of the Society".⁶

The Serbs of South Chicago founded their own Serbian Support Association "Balkan" in 1899. Some years later it was reorganised and renamed SSA "Karadjordjevic".⁷ In 1905 they also founded the society which they named "Lika and Krbava — The Holy Saviour".⁸

Apart from these, numerous other benevolent societies were founded in Chicago (SSA "Obilic", SSA "St. George", SSA "St. Jovan" etc.). In time some disappeared, but others, whose aims were more permanent, grew through a process of integration into regular insurance organizations. The majority of benevolent associations in Chicago today are lodges of The Serbian National Federation with its headquarters in Pittsburgh.⁹

All the benevolent societies were in fact *working class* in structure. However our immigrants were also involved in trade unions and workers organisations, already at the beginning of the 20th century, participating in strikes and demonstrations together with American workers. Later they join some *political* parties, founding their own sections within the party. So in 1910 The Yugoslav Socialist Federation was founded within the American Socialist Party. Before its founding, some of the immigrants had already broken away and joined the Socialist Workers Party of America, founding the Yugoslav Socialist Workers Union. After World War I and division in the Socialist Party of America, as well as among our workers, immigrants of Left orientation joined the Communist Party of America while the Right orientated created their own Yugoslav Educational Union.¹⁰

At the time of the Balkan Wars, World Wars I, and II, national awareness becomes stronger in the Serbian colonies in Chicago and also throughout America. On the one hand this was reflected in the foundation of the national-benevolent organisation, Serbian National Defence in 1914.¹¹ Simultaneously, in the already formed organisations, a struggle for national interest prevailed. For this reason many of them reorganise and adapt to the new tendencies changing the existing regional and religious names to national ones. On the other hand individuals and groups were opposed to the new tendencies, considering that the activities of benevolent societies

⁶ United Serbian Society, 100th Anniversary, Chicago 1981, 9–10, 33

⁷ L. Pejović, op.cit, 23

⁸ Fiftieth Anniversary 1919–1969, Archangel Michael SOCh, South Chicago 1969, 323

⁹ Spomenica Srpskog narodnog saveza 1901–1951, Pitsburg 1951

¹⁰ I. Čisnić, Hrvati u životu SAD, Zagreb 1982, 175–181

¹¹ Spomenica SNS, 91–108

should be directed primarily to socio-economic interests and improvement of the immigrants living conditions.

The most numerous and probably the most influential organisation among our immigrants in Chicago, and throughout America, was that of the Serbian Orthodox *Church*.¹² When our colonies became stronger and the immigrants became aware that their settlement was not temporary, as they had hoped in the beginning, the necessity to found religious establishments became evident. So in 1904 the Serbian Orthodox Congregation (SOC) “St. Elijah”, was founded, today the SOC “Archangel Michael” in South Chicago¹³ and in 1905 the SOC “Holy Resurrection” was established in the north of the city.¹⁴ Liturgy was held at first in temporary rented halls but later a church was built in Schiler Street and in South Chicago, in Commercial Avenue. In time, the Serbs of Chicago formed several more SOC’s and about forty miles outside the city two monasteries were founded, “St. Sava” in Libertyville and “Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God”, a copy of Gracanica, in Third Lake. Since 1923 the monastery in Libertyville has been the seat of the Serbian Orthodox American-Canadian Dioceses,¹⁵ while the monastery in Third Lake became the centre of the Serbian Orthodox Free Dioceses of USA and Canada at the time of schism.¹⁶

From the beginning the parishes were established as church-school congregations and as well as religious function they gradually developed cultural, educational and social activities. Numerous organisations appeared or were sponsored by them to meet the various needs of the immigrants, ranging from cultural-educational and sport to ideological and political. Even some of the old benevolent organisations, in time, came under their influence or jurisdiction.

With the strengthening of social life in the parishes, cultural-artistic programs, balls and entertainment were held, and the need for music appeared. So to begin with, in the colony in the northern part of the city, the Tambour Orchestra “Srbadija” was formed and then the idea of forming a choir arose. The Serbian Singing Society (SSS) “Branko Radicevic” was founded already in 1906. To begin with it fostered secular music, performing most frequently patriotic songs. Later they began to include spiritual music and function as the church choir.¹⁷ The Singing Society “Sloboda”, founded in 1927, in the Church-school congregation “Archangel Michael”, in South Chicago, developed in a similar fashion.¹⁸

Another important organisation, which appeared in the church-school parish, was the women’s club (usually called Circle of Serbian Sisters — CSS). In the parish “The Holy Resurrection” the CSS was founded in 1927¹⁹ and in the parish “Archangel

¹² See in: Sava, bishop of Jumadija, *Istorija Srpske Pravoslavne crkve u Americi i Kanadi 1891–1941*, Kragujevac 1994.

¹³ *Fiftieth Anniversary 1919–1969*, St. Michael SOCh, South Chicago 1969, 112

¹⁴ *Spomenica SPC Vaskresenija Hristova, 1905–1955*, Čikago 1955, 57

¹⁵ *Spomenica, Tridesetogodišnjica SPM Sv. Sava i icesdesetogodišnjica SPC u Americi, Libertivil 1953*, 69–72

¹⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, 4th July 1983, 12

¹⁷ *Serbian Choral Society “Branko Radicevic”*, 75th Anniversary, Chicago 1981, 13–21

¹⁸ *Serbian Choral Society “Sloboda” 1927–1977*, 105

¹⁹ *Patrons Saint Day of the circle of Serbian Sisters of the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral Holy Resurrection*, Chicago 1977, 20

Michael” in 1926, while an independent CSS “Princess Zorka” was founded because of some misunderstandings caused by regional²⁰ interest in South Chicago, in 1934²¹. This circle still works independently but is active in its helps for the parish. Immigrants of Serbian origin were organised in these groups and work together voluntarily helping different activities in the parish: organise and run the parish school, collect financial contributions for the building or renovation of churches and parish halls; work in the kitchen when there is a picnic, banquet or fish supper; join in the work of the national association of CSS which organises and runs children’s camps in the dioceses seats, and many other activities.

With the increase in numbers of children and young people the need arose for organisations which would include them. So the Serbian School was founded, where the children learned their mother tongue and received at least a basic knowledge of the history and culture of their predecessors. In Sunday school they learned Christian doctrine. Apart from that numerous cultural groups, sports clubs, folklore groups, tambour orchestras and other clubs were founded which served mainly the young.

In this way church-school parishes were established with a wide network of varied organisations and included almost all our emigrants. During the first waves they more or less coincided with the colony. Almost the entire life of the early emigrants and their posterity developed within the colony and its organisations. They also had their own shops, taverns, banks and even cemeteries. In the colonies they found social satisfaction which was often lacking in their contact with society in general.

Following World War II the influx of a large number of political immigrants changes the picture of the Serbian community in Chicago drastically. They derived from another cultural milieu and had received a better education and specialised qualifications, in the homeland. At the beginning they, too, were employed as factory workers, settled in the already established colonies and were active in the existing organisations. However, as many of them took school diplomas or finished courses in Chicago, they advanced quickly and achieved independence more easily.

In view of the fact that, at home, they belonged to a more respected class they considered that they were entitled to higher social status in the colonies. Due to the fact that the earlier immigrants and particularly the generations following them were unwilling to give up their acquired role of leaders, great turmoil followed in the communities. The “newcomers” quickly abandon the colonies and found their own mainly politically orientated organisations, for the most part connected with the ideology movements of World War II in the homeland, (Serbian Chetnik Movements “Ravna Gora”, “Draza Mihajlovic”,²² “Gavrilo Princip” and others). Besides the political organizations, they also founded some of a different type. Today the best known are the “Serbian Brothers Help” with its choir “Obilic” and property “Serbian Villages”,²³ the Serbian National University etc. Although they were mainly

²⁰ Separation between Serbs and Montenegrins sometime affected the Serbian community in Chicago in the past as well as in the present day.

²¹ Fiftieth Anniversary 1919–1969, St. Michael SOCh, South Chicago 1969, 205, 319

²² Military and ideological leader in World War II

²³ Spomenica dvadesetpetogodišnjice dobrotvornog udruženja Srpske bratske pomoći, Čikago 1975

humanitarian, culturally and educationally orientated these organisations were also ideologically toned.

The third wave of immigrants had better education, specialised qualifications and work experience, so as soon as they mastered the English language they assimilated more easily into the surrounding. As the colonies formed in the sixties deteriorated, they did not settle there and it was seldom that members of the early organisations were members of the Church-School parishes, and then only formally. In this way they manifest awareness of their higher education and social level in relation to the previous waves and their posterity, but also clearly refused to participate in the old, especially political, discussions and fights in communities. They formed several mainly cultural or professional organisations (e.g. Serbian Academic Club). However this group like their predecessors did not succeed to attract later groups and other segments of our immigrants into their organisations.

Those who belonged to the Second and later generations of our immigrants in Chicago did not found their own special organisations, through which they would struggle for affirmation of their attitudes and ideas, but in time they took over the old organisations, particularly those founded by the immigrants of the first wave. They frequently changed their purpose, so that the majority today are engaged in culture and tradition.

Today every church-school congregation in Chicago, besides a church, has a church house in which there are facilities for all its organisations, Circle of Serbian Sisters, choral and folklore groups, sports and other clubs. They also have land, halls and restaurants in which immigrants gather and put on different manifestations: picnics, sports tournaments, balls, barbecues and cultural-artistic performances. National and church holidays are also celebrated here, both national and American, as well as personal events (weddings, birthdays, engagements) and family (Slava). Finally informal gatherings like fish suppers on Fast Days.

Besides regular meetings, they also celebrate their own founding day, similar manifestations are organised by our other immigrant organisations in Chicago. Apart from this the majority has developed publication activities. They print a variety of announcements, pamphlets, calendars, reports and memorial volumes for important jubilees. Some stronger organisations even published their own newspaper, through which they fight for affirmation of their opinions and ideas. In recent years the church-school parishes are beginning to publish their own parish newspaper. They are mainly taken up with the presentation of community news: birth, marriage and death columns, then information concerning meetings of organisations, picnics, charity activities and other parish news.

Although today in Chicago there is no longer a colony in the real sense, the church-school parishes and organisations form an immigrant community, which is to some extent still isolated from the majority of society. Immigrants from all waves and generations join in their various activities, even those who are not formally members of any organisation. This complex ethnic community includes different segments of Serbian immigrant groups, which created a wide network of organisations of various types. They have played several roles in the immigrant community.

On first sight the organisations satisfied the particular interests of the individuals and groups which formed them. The Serbs in Chicago originated from different parts of the homeland and there, as well as in Chicago, they belonged to different socio-eco-

conomic structures, in society, and had different political and ideological affiliation. On the one hand this contributed to the local colour of their culture, tradition, customs and ritual, even those which are usually considered and analysed as symbols of ethnic identity (mother tongue, traditional customs, national food). On the other hand there is the formation of special organisations, which by affirming their individual, frequently contradictory opinions and values, constantly contribute to the consolidation of old and creation of new discord, even open conflict, among the Serbs in Chicago. Lack of agreement, in the Serbian ethnic community, culminated at the beginning of 1964 in schism within the Serbian Orthodox Church in America, which was not formally resolved until 1990. On one side there were those who favoured unity with the Serbian Orthodox church in Belgrade, the so-called “federalists”, and on the other side those who advocated separation and founding of an independent Serbian Orthodox Church in America, which would not be under the influence of the communist regime in Belgrade, the so-called “schismatics”. Despite the fact that this division emerged within the religious institution and was presented as an ideological conflict, its was in essence not aggravated by religious questions, but derived from differences in the cultural tradition and political affiliations of the old immigrants and political immigrants from the period after World War II.²⁴ The life of the Serbian community in Chicago was marked for this reason by dissension and labelling by the opposing groups and their organisations: people from Lika/ Montenegrins, Hercegovinians/ Shumadians, socialist/ nationalist, communist/ Chetnik, old settlers/ new commers, schismatics/ federalists, authentic Serbs/ Americanised Serbs etc.

However the majority of organisations showed contradictory tendencies, even at the time of formation, insisting that their basic aim was to gather all immigrants together²⁵ and preserve their tradition and culture. The majority achieved this only occasionally when gathered for informal activities like events, celebrations, picnics etc. whose basic function is gathering immigrants and consolidation of the community. As the presence of Serbian elements, particularly those which are considered symbols of ethnic identity (gibanica, chevapčici, shlivovica, kolo, patriotic songs etc) were emphasised at these events they frequently grew into genuine ethnic holidays for the Serbs of Chicago.²⁶

The Church-School Congregations and their organisations played a decisive role in overcoming the differences in the immigrants’ environment. Namely, up to the schism in 1963, they were an organisation which, with their widespread activities, insured collaboration among different segments of the Serbian ethnic community, regardless of whether they derived from different local cultural traditions in the homeland, from different socio-economic environments or political affiliation in exile. The church attempted to articulate and solve numerous social and ideological conflicts by emphasising the same religious affiliation of the Serbian immigrants and identifying

²⁴ Dj. Vrga and F. Fahey, *Changes and Socio-religious Conflict in an Ethnic Minority Group, The Serbian Orthodox Church in America*, San Francisco, 1975, 70–71

²⁵ The last effort to unify Serb immigrants in USA is establishment of the Serb-American Congress in November 2002 in Chicago, which is formed by their three mayor organisations: Serbian National Federation, Serbian National Defence and Congress of Serbian Union

²⁶ M. Pavlović, *Srpski etnički festival u Čikagu, A IV. Nemzetkozi neprajzi nemzetiségkutató konferencia*, Bekescsaba, Debrecin 1991, 351–355

it with national belonging. It contributed to homogenisation of the ethnic communities, through unification of different regional cultural traditions, by codifying the simplified models of customary practice, in which specific regional difference were absent, but foreign cultural elements also appear, accepted in the new environment.²⁷

The immigrant organisations appear as a sphere of expressing the way of life and values, which they acquired in the new surroundings. Even in the days the colonies, immigrant communities were never completely isolated from the influence of the new surrounding, so that very early numerous elements adopted from it were noticed in the way of life and customs of our immigrants. Likewise immigrants, particularly the later generations, felt themselves as members, both of the Serbian community and American society. Such tendencies were expressed very early already in 1910 with the formation of the Serbian American Society “St. George”.²⁸

Finally, but not the least important, immigrant organisations appear as representatives of the Serbian community and its cultural tradition throughout American society. Thus different organisations have their stands at the festival of American culture — Folk Fair. Choral societies and folklore groups have had several appearances on radio and television, while members of the Serbian community in Chicago are particularly proud of the participation of the Singing Society “Sloboda” in the programme of the festival for the inauguration of the USA president in Washington D.C. in 1957.²⁹

Thus, immigrant organisations and particularly the Church-School Congregations, thanks to their numerous activities are the real centres of immigrant way of life and culture. As such they represent one of the most significant factors in preserving the ethnic identity of Serbs in Chicago. As the life of the earliest immigrants was spent in fact within the framework of the ethnic community, it is not strange that they preserved their ethnic identity intact and to a large extent transferred it to their children. On the other hand they remained on the margins of American society. Serbs in later waves of immigration, although members of their ethnic organisations, much more frequently join the cultural and public life of the wider community. Even if not actually active in immigrant organisations they remain close, through informal contact with the members of their ethnic group, and at home speak their mother tongue and cherish tradition. Therefore non membership of ethnic organisations does not necessarily mean loss of ethnic identity, although the immigrants themselves underline their great significance.

The influence of organisations in preserving ethnic identity is however much more expressed among second and later generations of our emigrants. It has been noticed that children who went to the parish schools and participated in the activities of Serbian cultural and sports organisations are better acquainted with their mother tongue and culture and are more closely related with members of their ethnic group, than children who did not, even when their parents paid great attention to preserve ethnic identity within the family.

²⁷ Analysis of the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Chicago in the work: M. Pavlović, *Religijska i etnička pripadnost*, Glasnik Etnografskog instituta Srpske akademije nauka i umetnosti XLVI, Beograd 1997

²⁸ Spomenica SPC Voskrsenija Hristova 1905–1955, Čikago 1955, 275

²⁹ Srpsko pevačko društvo “Sloboda” 1927–1977, Čikago 1977

Finally we may conclude, on the one hand, that the numerous Serbian immigrant organisations, from religious to cultural, sports and political, expressed and consolidated different types of differentiation and segmentation in the ethnic community, from regional cultural to social and political while, on the other hand, they contribute to the gathering of our emigrants and preservation of their ethnic and cultural heritage. Apart from that, within the organisations, a particular American Serb culture develops with which particularly the later generations could easily identify but they are also the means by which the Serbian community in Chicago receives its affirmation in the wider American society.

Translation: A. Vasić

Мирјана ПАВЛОВИЋ

УЛОГА ИМИГРАНТСКИХ ОРГАНИЗАЦИЈА У ЖИВОТУ СРБА У ЧИКАГУ

У првом делу рада дат је преглед демографских одлика миграције и различитих типова исељеничких организација (добротворна друштва, црквене парохије, политичке организације, црквене школе, хорови, фолклорне групе итд.) Срба у Чикагу у прошлости и данас. У другом делу рада разматра се утицај исељеничких организација и исељеничких окупљања на формирање и развој српске етничке заједнице у Чикагу, као и на очување и испољавање етничког идентитета различитих генерација и таласа српских исељеника у овом граду. Примењен је савремени концепт етничког идентитета/етничитета, чију основу чине ситуациони приступ и комбинација културних и социјалних аспеката, а нагласак је на субјективној димензији и симболичком карактеру етничког заједништва и различитости.

Анализа је показала да се исељеничке организације својим деловањем и бројним активностима јављају као прави центри исељеничког начина живота и културе. С једне стране, оне доприносе очувању етничког и културног идентитета исељеника. С друге стране, међутим, оне одражавају и учвршћују различите видове сегментираниости српске заједнице у Чикагу. Осим тога, организације имају значајну улогу у формирању специфичне исељеничке културе америчких Срба. На крају, оне су значајан фактор у афирмацији српске исељеничке заједнице и њене специфичне културе у ширем америчком друштву.