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A Lesson in Language Revival

A lesson in language revival

Peter Berresford Ellis examines the campaign to revive the Slovenian language and argues that while the Slovenian peoples' determination to hang on to their language should have been an inspiration to the Irish, language revival can only succeed where people want it to

THERE ARE now ten European states due to sign up to the European Union. I am all for it. Now that statement may come as a surprise to my fellow Euro-sceptics so I will explain my reasons for saying this while maintaining that I am still a Euro-sceptic.

Readers of my work over the years will know that I am a disciple of the teachings of Leopold Kohr who set out the theory that the universal cause of modern social difficulties is the overgrowth of societies. Professor Kohr proposed that man's best social organisation was a world of small states. He argued that the breakdown of multi-national states and all empires was an inevitable process. (see *Irish Democrat*, December 1994/January 1995).

One important lesson that he taught was that there was an optimum growth level beyond which empires, multi-national states and, indeed, multi-national conglomerates began an inevitable disintegration and breakdown. Empires come and go because they become too big and unwieldy to control.

History also teaches that languages spread and then inevitably break down into dialects and then these dialects become new languages. I concede that with mass communication, which became a factor in the 20th century, this phenomenon might have received a check. But think how many dialects there are in the tiny space of England alone.

So it is another inevitability that the faster the EU grows the sooner it will reach critical mass. While the EEC remained manageable, dominated by France and Germany -- and even with the United Kingdom entering the 'club', it was dangerous. The idea of a super-state was certainly on the cards. Although groups have tried to stop the behemoth of the Euro state, the beast is now in existence and its growth is inexorable.

But with the greed for expansion, the architects of Europa have, like the Roman emperors, and the kings of Spain, Portugal and England after them, established the certainty of it's eventual collapse.

So the more who join the club constitutionally balance and negate the power of the big Euro states like Germany, France, Britain et al, preventing the growth of a dominant one-culture superstate emerging. The faster the expansion, the faster the collapse. The more who join, the more the checks and balances will emerge.

One of the fascinating aspects of the ten countries that are now due to be incorporated into the European family is that seven of them had to go through linguistic struggles and language restoration. All of them succeeded in reasserting their language and culture after centuries of imperialism; an imperialism that was political, economic and cultural. They present examples to the Irish language restoration movement which might be viewed with discomfiture. Why have they succeeded while Ireland failed?

The answer is simple of course. The Irish state, for all its vaunted and professed idealism to restore the language to its proper place in society, had no will to do so. Simply putting the language on a school



curriculum and teaching it would no more restore the language than western education has restored Latin or classical Greek.

The language movement might point to recent Census figures showing a third of the Irish Republic claim to speak Irish and that 9.98 per cent of the six counties also make that claim but, in reality, and the experts agree, we are only talking about 6-8 per cent of the entire Irish population who are actually fluent in the language.

So let's examine one tiny nation that now joins the EU -- Slovenia. The Slovenian language is spoken today by 2.4 million people, of which 1.85 million live in the Slovenia Republic that emerged in 1991. The rest live in enclaves in Austria and Italy. Slovenia a small country -- 7,819 square miles, half the size of Switzerland. The total population is just under two million and Ljubljana is its capital. It is a highly industrialised country.

The region by the first century AD was part of the Roman empire. It was settled by the Slavs in the 6th century who became Catholics. In AD 788 they were conquered by the Frankish empire and then in AD 843 by the Bavarian dukes who reduced the Slovenes to serfdom and set up a German-speaking ruling and middle class. The Habsburg empire took over in 1335 by which time many Slovenes had become German speaking monoglots.

The earliest piece of Slovenian writing is found in the Freisingen manuscript of AD 1000, which is a short confessional prayer and a religious homily.

Curiously enough, the Protestant reformation helped to save the language from utter destruction. The German ruling class in Slovenian was Catholics. Catholicism was the religion of the empire. Slovenian intellectuals, desirous of maintaining knowledge of their own language, welcomed the new reformed religion. Protestant Slovenes led by Primoz Trubar (1508-86) began to write religious tracts in the language and Trubar developed the first printed Slovenian alphabet in 1550. In 1584 Jurj Dalmartin (1547-89) published the Bible (1584), a prayer book and other items in Slovenian while Adam Bohori (1520-1586) printed a grammar.

This national literary awakening excited a Slovenian national awareness that led to insurrections against the Austrian Habsburg empire in 1478, 1515, 1573 and 1635, all of which were ruthlessly crushed.

In the 17th century there was a counter reformation and the unfortunate outcome of this was the destruction of most of the Slovenian literature inspired from the Protestant intellectuals with, thankfully, the exception of the Slovenian Bible whose grammar and orthography served as the model for future Slovenian writers.

Today, some 87.9 per cent of Slovenians are still Catholics, although all other religions are given full rights.

Marko Pohlin (1735-1801) was a man inspired by the idea of restoring the Slovenian language and changing his people from German-speaking to Slovene-speaking once more. His contemporaries of course, ridiculed him. But he started writing and printing primers and textbooks and campaigning for state recognition for the language.

The movement that he started finally began to draw support from other intellectuals. B Kumedj and J Japley collaborated on a new translation of the Bible. Valentin Vodnik (1758-1819), a grammarian and lexicographer, launched and edited the first Slovenian language newspaper which existed from 1780-1800. In 1809 Napoleon Bonaparte entered the picture. He annexed Slovenia, with other territories, to the French empire. Recognising that a German-speaking Slovenia might remain loyal to Austria, he gave Slovenian 'official status'. Vodnik used this French occupation to establish a large number of Slovenian schools and in 1811 produced a modern grammar. However, not all the factions of the Slovenian language restoration movement were agreed on grammar and orthography. Jernej Kopitar (1780-1844) had published a grammar in 1808 and it was this work, rather than Vodnik's, soon became the standard.

Although French occupation only lasted from 1809-1814 it gave the Slovenes a taste of cultural freedom after centuries of Germanisation. But the Austrians reclaimed Slovenia after the defeat of Napoleon. Their suppression and renewed persecution of the



language was vicious.

Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia had all fallen under the thrall of Austria. Now the intellectuals thought that because of their common affinities they ought to band together and fight for a single united self-governing state. Some even thought that this unification ought to be in the cultural field as well. A move was to create a unified alphabet but thanks to the foresight of France Preseren, the Slovenians rejected the amalgam of Serbo-Croat and the Cyrillic alphabet, sticking to their own language and the Latin alphabet.

It was France Preseren (1800-1849), a lawyer who was a freethinker and republican, who is regarded as the great national poet and literary figure of Slovenia.

By the mid-19th century, German was still the language of trade, education, administration, and even religious teaching. Only a third of the population, mainly the illiterate rural communities, spoke Slovenian. Among them were found seven dialectical groups and 46 dialects. The diversity of pronunciation made the task of restoring the language to all the people appear almost impossible.

Preseren's determination to link the language with a political movement began to bear fruit. *Novice*, a Slovenian language newspaper, edited by J Bleuveis (1843-1901) became the voice of Slovenian nationalists. One of its chief contributors, J Vessel Koeski, led the March, 1848, uprising against the Austrian empire. His aim was a Slovenian-speaking independent state having an external association with the Austrian empire, rather like De Valéra proposed alternative to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921.

The insurrection failed but out of the massive repression a new determination was born. National clubs, an underground literature and language classes blossomed. From the 1870s there grew the idea of the unification of all the Balkan Slavic peoples, each retaining their languages and cultures, but subscribing to a single state.

On 30 May 1917, the Slovenian deputies in the Austrian reichstat, put forward a plan for Slav unification within the Austrian empire. But at the end of World War I 1918, the Austrian empire had ceased

to exist. On 1 December 1918, the state of Yugoslavia came into being.

While part of Slovenia was given to this new Serbian dominated state, the district of Gorcia -- with a population of 300,000 Slovenes -- was given to Italy. Austria was allowed to keep other Slovenian enclaves, mainly Carinthia. In spite of this, the Slovenian national movement continued to work on re-Slovenification. A pronunciation standard was agreed on based on the dialect of Dolenjsko and Gorenjsko. The first Slovenian university was founded at Ljubljana.

By 1939 the basis of the language restoration was complete -- 20 years after getting rid of Austrian dominance and without full political autonomy. Only a small German-speaking population remained on the Austrian-Slovene border.

During the second world war, Nazi Germany occupied Slovenia. But on 16 January 1947, the Peoples Republic of Slovenia came into existence as an autonomous republic of the federal state of Yugoslavia.

As part of the end of war settlement, some parts of the Slovenian territories in Austria were handed to the new state, except Carinthia. Italy was forced to give most of the Slovenian territory of Venezia Giulia to the new state. But the territory of Trieste was not given back and in 1954 it was confirmed that this would continue as part of the Italian state.

As the new 'Nineties' decade began, Slobadan Milesovic's 'Greater Serbian' imperialism ensured that the Yugoslavian state would disintegrate into its constituent nations. As Milesovic increased his efforts to exert authority by armed aggression the multi-national Yugoslavia quickly fell apart.

Slovenian was lucky. It was the first of the Yugoslav nations to secede from the federation and become fully independent. On 23 December 1990, in a referendum, 88.5 per cent of voters voted for an independent Slovenia and on 25 June 1991, Slovenia declared its official independence.

Milesovic's attempt to invade was held up when Croatia and then Bosnia-Herzegovina also declared their independence and his armies became bogged down. Slovenia was, therefore, able to peacefully



establish itself and was quickly recognised other countries and the United Nations.

Slovenia is a highly literate country and its book production and readership would put many countries to shame. The Slovenian determination to hang on to their language at all costs should surely have been an inspiration to Ireland. A much smaller nation with a language which did not come near to having the literary background wealth that Ireland has inherited, has emerged from centuries of political, economic and cultural persecution and shown that language revival does work -- but only if people want it to.