

The Milwaukee Slovenians

For much of its history, the central European country of Slovenia was largely controlled by the Habsburgs of Austria, who ruled the Holy Roman Empire and its successor states, the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary (some of the country's coastal areas were held for a time by Venice). Slovenia became part of Yugoslavia for most of the 20th century and came under communist control following World War Two. The Yugoslav federation dissolved in 1991, and the independent Republic of Slovenia emerged.

These periods of Slovenia's history would influence immigration to the United States and subsequently to the Milwaukee area. The earliest Slovenian immigrants came to America for opportunity; the later came as refugees, fleeing communist tyranny.

Early Slovenian immigrants to Milwaukee

A few Slovenians arrived in Wisconsin in the 19th century. An immigrant of note was Father Frederic Baraga, who ministered to the Chippewa in the La Pointe area beginning in 1835. Others began arriving in the 1870s. Most who came to Milwaukee first settled in the Walker's Point neighborhood.

The beginnings in Walker's Point

Most of the early Slovenian settlers lived near South 6th and National Avenue or near South 9th and Mineral Streets. They opened a number of social clubs near the former location, including South Side Turn Hall, Llidia Hall and Harmonie Hall. Near the latter location, they built St. John's Catholic Church (a.k.a. St. John the Evangelist). In 1916, Fr. Mark Pakiz and the Slovenian community purchased a former Jewish Synagogue at 4th Ave. and Mineral St. (today's 9th Street and Mineral Street) for the price of \$5,500 and St. John's Catholic Church was born. St. John's grew rapidly and in 1938 a new rectory was built. In 1952 a new parish hall was added.

As early as 1908, the Slovenians began to form fraternal organizations. One was known as Sloga (Unity) which helped Slovenians who could not afford to pay for medical care and the costs associated with burials. It later became known as the Sloga Fraternal Life Insurance Society.



"Earlier immigrants came to America largely for economic reasons. The Triglav members are refugees from the Yugoslav Communist era."

"The difference between the Triglav members and other Slovenians is that the Triglav members were more recent immigrants, spoke the language natively, and had first-hand experience of growing up in the old country. Other Slovenians in Milwaukee are descended from earlier migrations and had fraternal life insurance or mutual aid organizations such as SLOGA or KSKJ organized into lodges that sponsored activities like bowling and social events. Those differences are blurring now that Triglav is increasingly second generation, too."

"I think we managed to fit in with the other populations on the South Side."

Quotes of Slovenian informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

By far, the largest employer of the Southside Slovenians was the Pfister and Vogel Tannery in the nearby Menomonee River Valley. Others worked at Patrick Cudahy meat packing plant and Allis Chalmers. Still others opened businesses in Walker's Point. Matthew Setina, for example, owned a tailor shop at 282 West National Avenue in the 1930s. He and his wife Mary were Slovenians who had been living in Germany prior to immigrating to the United States. The family resided one block west of the shop and spoke Slovenian at home.

A high-profile Slovenian, whose family also owned a tavern, is featured below.

Meet your past Slovenian neighbor

Pfister & Vogel Tanneryⁱ



"Poles and Slovenians seem to have a similar temperament and history. . . A Slovenian wedding and a Polish wedding were almost the same growing up in Milwaukee. The blood sausage that Poles call kiszka is the same as the Slovenian sausage by a different name. We always called it by its Polish name. Both nationalities like sausages of all kinds. They shared working-class neighborhoods and hobbies like bowling. My nephews all bowled with their parents although they are now one-quarter Slovenian. Probably my favorite instance of Poles and Slovenians sharing a tradition is the blessing of the baskets on Holy Saturday before Easter."

"I think traditionally the big contribution that Slovenians made to Milwaukee and other ethnic groups is accordion players. The Milwaukee or Cleveland style polka is considered by some to be Slovenian, although to my ear Slovenian folk music is smoother and preferable to the clanky typical Milwaukee-style polka."

"Isabelle Kralj, started her own dance company—the Milwaukee Dance Theatre, just recently change names to Theatre Gigante."

Quotes of Slovenian informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Louis G. Bashell, "Milwaukee's Polka King"

Louis ("Louie") Bashell was raised in the Walker's Point neighborhood. He was born on July, 1, 1914 while his family was living on Bruce

Street (then Park Place). His parents, Joe and Antonia Bashell (nee Samsa), were Slovenian immigrants. Louie took up the accordion at age 7 and began playing it at his parents' tavern in the neighborhood—a practice he continued for 50 years. As a teen, he honed his skills in the music program of Boy's Tech High School (*photo to left is him returning to the school for an event*ⁱⁱ). His musical genre was the polka--Slovenian style. The

Bashell family later moved to 13th and Walker, again in the neighborhood.

Bashell's acclaimed professional career began in Walker's Point and reached its heights after he and his wife, Stephine A. Starich, moved to the Jackson Park neighborhood at 5521 W. Jackson Park Drive. While living in Walker's Point, he formed a trio with himself, a drummer, and a saxophone player. Later, in the 1940s, Bashell formed a 5-piece band. One of their recordings, the Slovenian folk song, "Zidana Marela," ("Silk Umbrella"), sold out as fast as the band could make the records. This resulted in a contract with RCA Victor.

Bashell remained a Wisconsinite and a family man throughout his career. When RCA wanted Bashell to promote the records on a lengthy national tour, he refused, insisting that he wanted to be close to his wife and children, Robert, Linda, Diane, and Deborah. He continued to focus his career on the local scene, becoming known as "Milwaukee's Polka King."



While living in the Jackson Park neighborhood, and later in Greendale, he received numerous honors. These included six nominations for polka awards by the Wisconsin Area Music Industry, an induction into the Wisconsin Polka Hall of Fame, and a lifetime achievement award from the National Cleveland Style Polka Hall of Fame. His most significant award was when he became Wisconsin's first resident to receive a National Heritage Fellowship grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, becoming a National Heritage Fellow.

Having conducted his own polka band for more than seven decades, Bushell died of complications from pneumonia in 2008. He was interred at Mount Olivet Cemetery in Milwaukee.

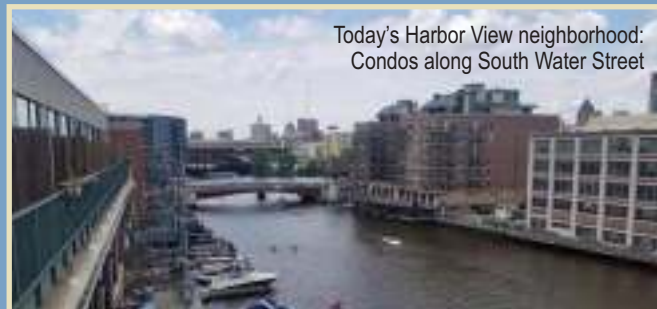
However, changes in the Walker's Point landscape had profound effects on the southside Slovenian community. The creation of the I-94 expressway through the Walker's Point neighborhood cost the Slovenian community many businesses, and most importantly, St. John's Catholic Church. On September 10, 1965, Archbishop William E. Cousins approved the relocation to 84th and Cold Spring Road.

But a hub of activity had already begun in the neighborhood just blocks east of Walker's Point.

The bustle of Harbor View

Milwaukee Slovenians also settled in large numbers in Harbor View, a neighborhood just north of Milwaukee's Bay View and just south of the Third Ward. The area was bounded on the east by Lake Michigan and the Jones Island peninsula and on the west by Walker's Point. By the late 19th century, Harbor View became a recipient of the early British and Welsh populations of Bay View, Yankee and German settlers from Walker's Point, Poles from further south, and Kashubes from Jones Island. By the 1930s, a large number of Slovenian families from Yugoslavia had settled in the neighborhood, and a significant number of them opened taverns.

In 1935, there were just over 200 residences in Harbor View and nearly 200 businesses—most modest sized establishments. The workers and their families who resided on the few residential blocks in the neighborhood had a multitude of choices for their livelihood. Residents easily found work in all the neighborhood industries.



Today's Harbor View neighborhood:
Condos along South Water Street

"While most Slovenians in Milwaukee moved southwest over time and hung together, my father and his Austrian wife moved southeast and we lived in a great melting pot of Milwaukee ethnic groups: Polish, Italian, Irish, and various types of German-speaking people. My father prided himself on doing business with a Jewish American wholesaler and African American window washers. Sticking with Slovenians on a day-to-day basis was not his priority. Understand that any generalization is going to be wrong, but my impression is that Slovenians tend to be a little on the quiet side until they have a couple glasses of wine and then they like to get loud and have a good time. Almost all of their literature is depressing and all their music is upbeat and happy. I kind of associate this personality with Catholics generally. There's a time to be serious and respectful, but there's nothing wrong with having a good time once in a while either. I think Slovenians like to be well mannered; on the other hand, maybe they can be a little cliquish."

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In 1906, the Milwaukee Solvay Coke Company (originally Milwaukee Coke & Gas) was established, supplying coke for the steel-making industry. It occupied 44 acres of land just south of today's Freshwater Sciences building and was a major employer of neighborhood residents. During the same decade, the Louis Allis Company opened on East Stewart Street, just a short walk and ferry ride from residences in Harbor View. The firm quickly became a market leader in design and manufacture of electric motors, as well as a major employer of residents on its surrounding blocks.

Below is a Slovenian family that took advantage of what Harbor View had to offer in the 1930s.

Meet another of your past Slovenian neighbors

The Sagadins

In 1910, John (Johann) Sagadin, a 22-year-old Slovenian immigrant from Makole, Austria, arrived in the United States. His parents were Matthew Sagadin and Theresa Planysek.

Three years later, Genevieve Lepej, a 21-year-old immigrant, also from Austria, arrived with her parents Mr. Lepej and Helen Medved. Both John and Genevieve found their way to Milwaukee, met, and married. They rented a house on East Washington Street in today's Harbor View neighborhood where John got a job for the railroad, most probably in the neighborhood yards.

By 1920, the Sagadins had a daughter Anna, and were renting out space in their home to two other Slovenian immigrants, Samuel Brumach and Anthony Turk—both of whom also worked for the railroad (*see public domain photoⁱⁱⁱ to the left*).

By 1940, the Sagadins had purchased a home on the same block as their rented one. The house was modest, with a value of \$1,200. The median value houses in 1940 was \$2,938. John was now working as a shipping clerk for a private enterprise, again likely in his own neighborhood. He told the census taker that he had worked 48 weeks in 1939 and earned \$1,200 for the year, slightly below average for Great Depression times. The couple now had at least three more children, Leo, Frances, and Doris.

While the Sagadins were a working-class family probably living from paycheck to paycheck, they had weathered the Great Depression in their own home. They lived surrounded by job opportunities and many Slovenian neighbors.



"Slovenians never outgrow their families, and elders have a lot of influence over their grown children. For me personally, a big challenge was overcoming my parents' resistance to my moving out of their home during my college years."

"Eating strudel or potica, or just grilled chicken, with all of the associated tastes, smells, textures, and maybe the process of preparing them, brings alive experiences we had with our parents or grandparents. Culture isn't just a memory of another time; it's tangible, shared experiences."

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While industry was dispersed throughout the Harbor View neighborhood in the first eight decades of the 20th century, the busiest commercial street by far was South 1st Street (previously named Clinton), on the western border of the neighborhood. The following chart lists the businesses operated by Slovenians on South 1st Street in the neighborhood in 1935. See the notes following the chart.

<i>Addresses on S. 1st in Harbor View in 1935</i>	<i>Name of business from <u>Milwaukee City Directory</u></i>
1025	John Pauling Shoe Repair
1100	Michael Stupar Tavern
1101	Stanley Takavar Tavern
1113	Frank Vratonar Tavern
1139	Mrs. Rose Repensek Restaurant
1301	Joseph Buzga Tavern
1315	David Radienovich Tavern
1407	Eli Damjanovich Tavern
1439	Michael Kremar Tavern
1541	Joseph Kesich Tavern
1619	Michael Mesich Tavern

Summary and notes (from U.S. Census and other public records):

- John Pauling, the shoe repairman, was a Slovenian immigrant from Yugoslavia. He'd worked in an auto truck company before opening his shop.
- Michael Stupar, with the tavern, was also a Slovenian immigrant from Yugoslavia. He'd arrived in the US in 1905 and served in the military during World War Two.
- Frank Vratonar, with the tavern, was another Slovenian immigrant from Yugoslavia. He lived in the neighborhood with his wife Mary and children. He'd arrived in the US in 1911.
- The Repensek family, with the restaurant, were also Slovenian immigrants from Yugoslavia. Members of the Repensek family worked at the Pfister and Vogel tannery.
- Joseph Buzga, with the tavern, was another Slovenian immigrant from Yugoslavia. He and his family lived at the same address as their bar.

"My father was a big believer in home remedies, often involving alcohol. The cure for the common cold or sore throats was brandy, lemon and honey. Stomachaches were cured with *brinovec*, which derives from the word *brin*, a juniper shrub, and it is made from *brinove jagode*, juniper berries. The people from the old country hated drafts, and had an aversion to excessive air conditioning, which I share. My father thought it was bad to sit on anything cold like a metal folding chair or concrete, and sitting around in a wet swimming suit was especially discouraged. The first thing you drank in the morning had to be hot. Tea, or chai, was considered healthy. I grew up drinking tea with caffeine in in early grade school. Chamomile and linden blossom tea were highly respected."

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- Daniel Radienovich, with the tavern, was another Slovenian immigrant from Yugoslavia. He and his wife Sophie lived in West Allis.
- Eli Damjanovich, with the tavern, was also a Slovenian immigrant from Yugoslavia. He and his wife Amelia also lived at the same address as their bar.
- Michael Kremer, with the tavern, was yet another Slovenian immigrant from Yugoslavia. He and his wife Katherine also lived at the same address as their bar.
- Joseph Kesich, with the tavern, was another Slovenian immigrant from Yugoslavia. He had worked at the coke factory prior to opening his own establishment.
- Michael Mesich, with the tavern, was another Slovenian born in Yugoslavia. He, his wife Anna, and children also lived at the same address as their bar. During Prohibition times, the bar became a rooming house.

Later Slovenian immigrants to Milwaukee

The later arriving immigrants were refugees. Slovenians were forced to flee their homeland at the end of World War Two. They fled to Vetrinje in Austria; some were forced back and subsequently massacred by communist militia.

After four years in camps in Austria and Italy, a group of Slovenians came to Milwaukee in 1949 as political refugees. Most settled in the same neighborhoods where the earlier immigrants still lived and adopted St. John's as their church. Jobs were available.

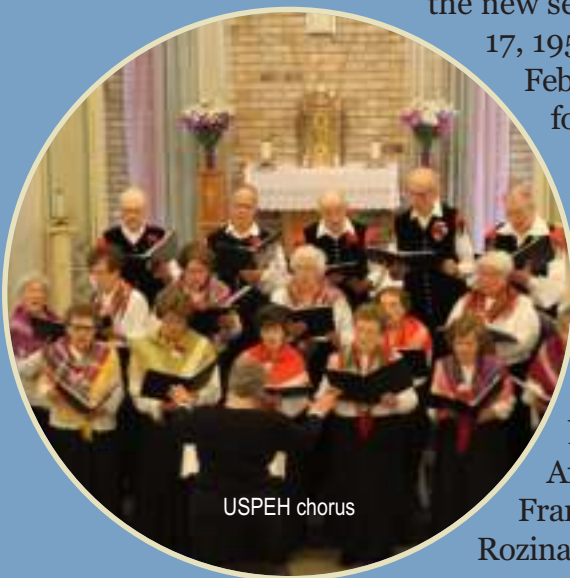
However, experiencing homesickness and some degree of cultural shock, the new immigrants decided to form their own society. A group of the new settlers called a meeting on November 17, 1950 in the church hall at St. John's. In February 1952, close to 30 families gathered for another meeting and chose the name, "Slovenian Cultural Society Triglav." The society held monthly meetings and went on to sponsor special activities and events, such as a chorus and two plays each year.

As the years continued, the society sought a place where they could hold large events in the warm months. After searching for some time, President Frank Mejač and Vice President Frank Rozina found, 15 acres of overgrown woods

"The Triglav Slovenian Cultural Society owns Triglav Park near Wind Lake in Racine County. The park was little Slovenia for immigrants that came to Milwaukee after World War Two, many of whom have passed on. Some families have cottages in the park; some visit on weekends; and others attend the public picnics at the park. At the park people still enjoy listening to their native music by means of live bands at the picnics (and recorded music otherwise), still speak some of their Slovenian language although less [than] they used to, and talk about the old country and their lives in the new country. The men used to sometimes stand around in a little group and sing in an impromptu chorus. They have a bar in the main building, called the Dom, and alcohol is usually part of the activities. They also built an outdoor chapel and a replica of the church at Bled, a famous landmark in Slovenia. Children enjoy the outdoors and sports, swimming in the lake, playing volleyball, and so forth. Keeping the park operating and looking good is done with all volunteer labor. Working hard is an important part of Slovenian culture."

"I hate the word 'slovenly.' Mostly I find it funny and sometimes frustrating that no one seems to know where Slovenia is."

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USPEH chorus

with many large oak trees and a small lake in the town of Norway in Racine County. On March 25th, 1961, the deed to this land was signed. The area was named Dobrodošli v Triglav Park.

Today

While some of the early- and later-arriving Slovenians have left Milwaukee—a few to Racine County, others to Greenfield, Cudahy, Waukesha, Kenosha, Sheboygan, and other Wisconsin towns—the largest group of Wisconsin Slovenians still lives in the Milwaukee and West Allis areas.

Despite its long history in the Milwaukee area, the Slovenian community continues to expand its resources. In 1982, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Peck School of the Arts received funding for the creation of the Slovenian Arts Program. Working in collaboration with that initiative, the Slovenian Arts Council now organizes concerts and performances. Triglav Park remains an ethnic and religious hub. The local Slovenian community continues to preserve their traditions through cultural institutions.

Meet one of your current Slovenian neighbors

Jeff Martinka

Like most Americans, Jeff Martinka has a mixed ethnic background. He's 50 percent Slovenian, 25 percent Czech, and 25 percent Polish. Beyond his ethnic activities, Martinka is well-known locally for his work

in government and nonprofits, and as the current executive director of Neighborhood House of Milwaukee. His education includes an MS in Urban Planning and an MA in Public Administration from UW-Madison, as well as a BA in Anthropology and Geology from UW-Milwaukee.

While Jeff Martinka has been active in many local ethnic organizations, he did not always live in Milwaukee. He'd lived in Minnesota where he participated in activities such as the Czech Slovak Folk Dancers in St. Paul for 5 years, Twin Cities Slovenians for 8 years, and the International Folk Fair in St. Paul.

In Milwaukee, Jeff Martinka has been active in ethnic singing and dancing, and bringing Slovenian cultural activities to the city. He's spent 20 years on the USPEH Slovenian Chorus, nearly a decade manning Slovenian cultural booths for the Holiday Folk Fair, 10 years on the Slovenian Arts Council, and 5 years as the editor of the USPEH Organization Slovenian Quarterly Newsletter. In addition, Jeff travels to Slovenia biannually and has also visited his Polish and Czech homelands.

Besides travel, Jeff Martinka enjoys travel, camping, hiking, live theater, movies, and interacting with a large extended family.



"I know many Slovenians, and my family has been very active in the artistic, cultural realm of the Slovenian ethnic community in Milwaukee. However, my family and their intimate friends were slightly different from the majority of Slovenian families in our community. We were more modern, secular, and preoccupied with Slovenian art, culture, theater, and the literary world. I grew up in a very different atmosphere from most Slovenian families here in Milwaukee."

"It is most important for me to maintain collaborative artistic connections with Slovenia and Slovenian artists, to visit Slovenia as often as possible, and to maintain my Slovenian language skills. This is because I am very at home in Slovenia and in Slovenian culture (contemporary, not just 'the old'). Since the death of my parents, I have more connections to Slovenia than I do to the Slovenian Ethnic Community in Milwaukee."

"We meet at the 8:00 Mass at St. John's which has Slovenian readings and songs. We gather in the summer at Triglav Park for picnics. We participate in the Holiday Folk Fair. There are fraternal groups KSKJ/SNPJ/SLOGA and the USPEH chorus (the only Slovenian chorus in Milwaukee). At these functions, we still have members that speak our Slovenian language. We enjoy playing 'Bolina' at Triglav Park and at before each picnic. We celebrate Mass in our Slovenian language."

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References

Mueller, B. Encyclopedia of Milwaukee. <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/slovenes/>
Urban Anthropology Inc. <http://neighborhoodsinmilwaukee.org/>

ⁱ Photo attribution: Flickr.com

ⁱⁱ Photo from public records at Ancestry.com

ⁱⁱⁱ Photo attribution: https://c1.staticflickr.com/4/3895/15091556160_791f04245e_b.jpg