

At the Potica Workshop

By

Blair Kilpatrick

(Opening chapter to *Potica Tales*, a food-and-roots memoir)

March 2016  
Slovenian Hall, San Francisco

I.

What's Your Name?

“What’s your name?”

I dusted the flour from my hands and looked up. A man of about thirty—with short hair, neat khakis and an expectant smile—had his cell phone aimed directly at me.

He had the familiar look of a Silicon Valley tech guy. I thought we had met earlier, although with my face recognition problems, I could never be sure. I tried to picture the people clustered around my work table, less than an hour ago.

He had been among them, I was almost certain, watching while I prepared my mother’s version of potica, Slovenia’s traditional celebration dish. I had left two of the sweet fragrant loaves rising on top of the blackened commercial ovens in the Slovenian Hall kitchen. Now I had two more to assemble, with the help of any workshop participants who cared to join in.

Evidently this fellow had failed to notice my name tag, positioned just below the collar of the flowing black tunic I hoped might hint at a baker's smock. I'd brought a whole stack of tags with me today precisely to avoid awkward moments like this.

"It's Blair," I reminded him.

"And what's your last name?" he prompted. Now he had raised his phone up over his head.

Suddenly I got it—he was making a video. My smile began to feel as stiff as those wax candy lips we used to buy at the five-and-dime store when I was a kid.

"Kilpatrick."

"No." Now he sounded impatient. "I mean your *Slovenian* name."

Oh. Right. My credentials. Not so obvious with a name like mine. He had found my Achilles heel. And the name was the least of it.

My surname—like my late father—was Scottish. I was not the only person at the Hall with this kind of mixed pedigree. In fact, the workshop had been organized by a man named McCormick, president of the EDCS, the Educational and Dramatic Club Slovenia. We all knew that ethnic names could end up on less visible branches of the family tree and sometimes disappeared altogether after a few generations in America.

But with the addition of Blair, my full name became a declaration of a very particular kind of heritage. It felt like waving a plaid flag—or wearing one of the blue-green kilts my mother had fashioned for my sister and me from our father's clan tartan. She, I suspected, was also responsible for choosing a series of baby names that reinforced our family's Scottish-American identity and established even more distance from her Slovenian roots.

During my childhood in Cleveland, most white kids seemed to have at least one immigrant grandparent, usually from Southern or Eastern Europe. We parsed our ethnicities with enthusiasm and mathematical precision: Half-Polish. Hungarian on my dad's side, Italian on my mom's. Half-Czech, a quarter German, a quarter English.

Whenever my mother overheard me say “and half-Slovenian” she cautioned me afterward. “Just say you're Scottish, like your father. You do have his name.” Or, if I insisted on labeling her side of the family, I should call it Austrian. The message was clear: We should avoid talking about her ethnic heritage—for reasons that were never explained at the time, although I always wondered what could be so shameful about being Slovenian.

Meanwhile, the camera was rolling. I still had a question to answer.

Unlike my fellow bakers, I didn't have a Slovenian name. But my mother did. At least she used to. But even that was complicated.

A few days earlier, I had started to write up a recipe description for distribution at the workshop:

Recipe: Walnut Honey Potica.

Source: My 93-year-old mother, Alice Kozlevcar Kilpat—

Then I had stopped, conscience-stricken. That three-name combination never existed. My mother was still in high school when my grandmother filed a petition to change the last name of her two middle children to something that sounded more American. She had been talked into it by her oldest son. He had taken that step on his own, after he got a scholarship to attend a private men's college on the east coast. According to my mother, her big brother got fed up with the mocking calls of “hey, polack!” whenever he stepped onto the college basketball court.

Evidently Slovenians didn't have a distinctive enough presence to merit their own ethnic slur. So the poor but ambitious boy with the funny name, who worked in the college dining hall to help pay his way, had to settle for a generic insult that could apply to anyone with Eastern European roots, not just Poles. By the time I was growing up, "polack" had evolved into an all-purpose put-down for any boorish, uneducated white person. I doubt we even appreciated the bigotry behind it.

So my mother's original surname was history by the time she married her high school sweetheart, my father, following his discharge from the Army at the close of World War II. I couldn't bring myself to bend the truth, no matter how much I wanted to use her maiden name as an easy way to establish her—and my own—credentials.

Besides, what if my mother found out?

Then the sad reality hit me: There was no chance of her finding out, unless I hand-delivered a copy to her assisted living residence and read it to her. And even if she noticed, she wouldn't remember for long. My smart, feisty mother had begun to experience cognitive decline a few years earlier, and now the signs of memory loss were unmistakable.

But old taboos don't go away. I couldn't do it. I deleted the name-that-never-was and tried again.

Source: My mother Alice, age 93, in the style of her mother Mary Adamic Kozlevcar (and her mother Jožefa)

Perfect. This version made it clear that my mother had not one, but two Slovenian parents. She had recently added one more name to the list of family bakers: her maternal grandmother, who lived with her family when she was a child. Her memory for recent events

might be cloudy, but she could still offer surprisingly confident answers to many of my questions about the past.

Now I could claim five generations of bakers, from the great-grandmother I never knew to my younger son, who had made his first potica for his ninth grade ethnic studies class at Berkeley High. Surely an unbroken family tradition, from an Eastern European peasant girl to her great-great grandson in America, should count for something.

So I gave that young man a final answer to his question. My Slovenian name? I looked right into his cell phone camera and offered up the abridged version of the family story.

“My maternal grandparents were named Kozlevcar and Adamic. He was a Slovenian immigrant and she was the child of immigrants. They met and married in Cleveland, where I was born.”

I even took pains to say those tricky names with the special “ch” sound, as though the little diacritical mark over the “c”—it looks like a jaunty cap or an inverted roof—hadn’t been knocked off years ago in America.

This was more than enough to establish my credentials. I was half Slovenian—with extra credit for the Cleveland connection. For years, it was the city with the world’s largest Slovenian population, second only to Ljubljana, that small country’s capital. Even today, Cleveland remains at the center of the community’s life.

But my answer left out the harder questions. The important ones.

Why was my mother so determined to disconnect herself—and her children—from her ethnic heritage? How and why did I change course, and begin the journey back? And why here, in California, after so many years in Midwestern cities with much larger Slovenian communities?

The only clear part—at least to me—was that our disavowed ethnic identity would have faded away by now if not for potica, the one tradition no one could surrender.

Potica (po-TEET-tsa) is a difficult dish to categorize. Americans often refer to it as Slovenian nut roll, although it doesn't necessarily include nuts. Slovenian sources classify it as a cake, even though some fillings are savory rather than sweet. Technically, potica is a rolled, filled yeast bread. My family's version is like the love child of brioche and baklava, dancing along the border between pastry and bread. Every slice is a feast for the eyes as well as the tongue, with thin concentric circles of egg-rich yeast dough alternating with a simple layering of melted butter, ground walnuts, cinnamon-scented sugar, and a generous lacing of honey.

As a child, I had a special ritual for deconstructing a slice of potica. I would carefully unwind the fragile spiral to better savor the contrasting elements. Mild golden cake against dark mahogany filling. The hint of bitterness from the walnuts, countered by the extravagant sweetness of the honey. The contrast of light and dark. And the final prize at the end of the spiraling trail: the rich, moist core.

Except for this one treasured food, my link to all things Slovenian ended in my teens, after my grandparents died. My family's move from Cleveland to the Chicago suburbs at around the same time served as a final line of demarcation. From that point on, our maternal heritage was distilled down into one essential and much-loved ritual, the baking of the annual Christmas potica. It became the bread of memory. But it was also the bread of forgetting, since for the rest of the year, no one—including me—gave any thought to our Slovenian roots.

That neat little Slovenian compartment cracked open again after I turned forty, thanks to a chance encounter with the Cajun accordion. Eventually, that unexpected musical passion would lead me right back to the very place my mother hoped her children would leave behind.

It was only after my husband and I moved to California that I took my own first cautious steps into a Slovenian community. My mother was surprised and skeptical. I was uneasy myself, but for different reasons. Until then, I had met just one person outside my extended family who shared her obscure heritage. Now I felt like a double outsider, both a Midwestern transplant and a newcomer to the Slovenian American world. I was like the prodigal daughter returning to the fold—except that I had never belonged to it in the first place.

Early on, I met a man at the Hall, middle-aged, also fairly new to the community. His parents were immigrants, he explained, but he didn't know any other Slovenians when he was growing up in a small town in upstate New York. Now, here in California, he had another chance to embrace his heritage. "I'm a born-again Slovenian," he said with a laugh.

He reminded me of a man I knew in southwest Louisiana, who described himself in the same way when we first met. He was an educator from a humble Cajun background who had internalized—and helped perpetuate—the middle class stereotypes about backward Cajuns who spoke broken French, listened to that old-fashioned "chanky-chanky" music, and hung out in disreputable bars and dance halls. But in response to the Cajun cultural renaissance going on around him, he finally saw the light in his middle years. He became a musician, a well-known accordion maker, and a cultural ambassador.

Am I a born-again *Slovenka*? I have misgivings about accepting a label that suggests naïve enthusiasm, or a compensatory and overzealous embrace for something that has come to feel so much a part of who I am. But maybe it fits.

After my own personal Slovenian renaissance began, my potica horizons started to broaden. Here at the Hall, I had tasted any number of homemade loaves, and a couple of commercial varieties, at potlucks and meat-heavy banquet dinners. When I finally traveled to Slovenia with my husband, we found potica everywhere: at farmers' markets, high-end restaurants, rustic *gostilnas*, airport snack bars, and the shelves of ordinary supermarkets.

I started to collect vintage cookbooks and compare recipes. Potica could assume more shapes than I realized. My mother favored long free-form rolls, but some cooks preferred a standard rectangular bread pan. The most traditional bakers, especially in Slovenia, used a deep round ceramic dish similar to a Bundt cake pan. Fillings offered even more possibilities, including some unusual tangy ones—chive, tarragon, bacon, pork cracklings—that were rarely encountered in the United States. Still, for most people the traditional sweet walnut version remained the favorite.

I started to branch out in the kitchen, mostly with fillings—almond, poppy seed, chocolate, a sprinkle of dried cranberries. I tried using a Bundt pan. Eventually, I would even attempt vegan and gluten-free versions. My sons liked the chocolate filling. My mother, a potica purist, took a dim view of my experiments.

I always came back to what I knew best.

I still believed there was no better potica than the one crafted by the skilled hands of my grandma and my mother, with the perfect dough-to-walnut ratio and the extra measure of honey. But I also had to face the reality. My mother's terse handwritten recipe had a few unusual twists, as well as an irregular pedigree. I did worry that this workshop might expose our treasured family version—and, by extension, me—as an inviting but inauthentic pretender. I understood that this was not a baking competition. The goal was simply to educate people about one of Slovenia's cherished national symbols. Still, comparisons would be inevitable—and I had a few good reasons for feeling insecure.

For starters, I was a pinch-hitter. Originally, when I'd learned about the workshop and offered to participate, the roster of bakers had been filled. Then someone cancelled, so I got my chance after all. But now that the day had arrived, I was having second thoughts about sharing my family recipe. Potica was the fragile thread that had sustained our heritage across four generations. What if it turned out to be a weak link, an American adaptation that had drifted too far from the source?

But there was more at stake than just my family potica recipe. For at least a decade, I had been exploring my family's past, trying to make sense of my mother's uneasy relationship to her Slovenian heritage. This journey had taken me to some dark places. Some of what I had uncovered was hard to think about—and challenging to write about. I had been trying to fashion a coherent narrative, but I kept getting lost in the details.

The full story was equally hard to talk about. Especially here, in front of all these good people, so dedicated to keeping their heritage alive. Along with the potica, my mother had fed us plenty of unflattering stereotypes about Slovenians. Her rejection of the Catholic Church was another loaded topic. Even the discoveries I welcomed—my grandfather's membership in a

radical union, my grandmother's claim that a once-famous leftist journalist was her cousin—would offend some of the people in this room. And even though my mother had been hinting that someone should tell her story, I still felt uncomfortable whenever I shared family secrets, especially her last and most painful one. But I was determined to tell at least part of the story today, even if I had to fight my inclination toward self-censorship every step of the way.

The storytelling started first thing in the morning, when I introduced myself to the group. We had an overflow crowd—forty people, more than expected. Everyone had assembled in the small, all-purpose meeting room on the first floor, across from the much larger banquet hall with the high ceiling and the smooth wooden dance floor where, for the first time in my life, I had danced to live polka bands. This smaller room was referred to as “the bar room” for an obvious reason: the old-fashioned bar extending along one wall, with a big mirror behind it and a painting of a rural scene up above.

My Slovenian language class met in this room on Monday nights. Perhaps it was the familiarity of the setting that prompted me to share the same confession I had made to my teacher Mia and the other students, that potica was only ethnic tradition my family had maintained.

As I looked around the room, another realization came to me.

“You know, I must be the first person in my extended family to set foot in a place like this in more than half a century. I feel so lucky to have found you all.”

I didn't mention the other part: That if my mother could have seen me at this moment, working so hard to establish my credibility in a community she had left behind long ago, she

would be less than impressed. In fact, if she could channel her younger self, she might even say: “Kiddo, you need to have your head examined!”

Later, at my assigned work table, I discovered that talking while working the dough was easier than expected. That repetitive rolling movement felt so soothing, so hypnotic, that the words just slipped out—until I was at the very edge of the thing I feared, the revelation that my family tradition might be an outlier.

It was hard to skirt the issue, because one of the distinctive features of my recipe was now obvious. While the other bakers were measuring flour and proofing yeast, I was already several steps ahead. My family’s potica is based on a refrigerated yeast dough—a far less common method, despite the advantages it offers. Consequently, after a long, slow overnight rise in the refrigerator of my Berkeley kitchen, this morning my dough was ready to roll. Evidently, so was I. The story flowed as smoothly as the rich, supple dough expanding under the weight of the wooden rolling pin and spreading across the floured cotton tablecloth.

My grandmother never used recipes, I explained. She was too good a cook for that. So my mother sat down in the kitchen of an old high school friend and copied her handwritten potica recipe. The friend got it from her mother. I paused before adding the final detail.

The friend—and her mother—were Serbian

“But I know that recipe had to be Slovenian,” I added quickly. “After all, what self-respecting Serbian American woman of that generation would need written instructions for a Serbian dish?”

I heard laughter and saw heads nodding in agreement. Of course!

Whew. I had dodged the first culinary bullet.

I knew that ownership of potica could be a touchy issue. Similar sweet yeast breads, under a variety of names, can be found elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe—and beyond. I once encountered a potica-like nut loaf in the dining hall of an Israeli kibbutz. But it is only in Slovenia that the simple notion of rolling a yeast dough around a filling has been turned into a national symbol and a culinary art form, with so many variations, both sweet and savory, and so many refinements. As far as I know, Slovenia is the only country to feature potica on a postage stamp. In a final culinary coup, the government recently came up with an official recipe, which has the precision of an architect’s blueprint. They are close to reaching the ultimate goal: to have potica officially classified as a “protected European Union foodstuff” that is unique to Slovenia.

Although I was relieved that the story behind my recipe hadn’t appeared to raise eyebrows, the real test would come at the end of the day, when everyone tasted the finished poticas. Since I had a head start with the refrigerated dough, and—unlike the two other bakers—I did not use one of those deep Bundt pans, my smaller loaves were the first to emerge from the imposing heavy-duty ovens in the Slovenian Hall kitchen.

I studied the pair of long, flat loaves I had set carefully on a kitchen counter. They appeared to be just the right shade of brown. The honey had oozed out only a little. The potica looked done, but it was always hard to tell before cutting one open. I placed the loaves on a wooden cutting board and got ready to carry my treasures out to the bar room, where I would be the first of the bakers to slice and serve.

Then I stopped. How could I have forgotten the last crucial step?

In my family, we never serve potica straight from the oven. With all that honey, the center of the loaf has the texture of bread pudding if it is cut too soon. The potica also tastes better if it has time to settle for at least a few hours, or even overnight.

Well, there was nothing to do about it now. I needed to settle myself down and face the music.

The first loaf sliced up nicely, even if the the center was a little softer than I would have liked, and the thin concentric layers were less distinct then they would be after a more thorough cooling. Before I could finish arranging the last slices on a platter, a group of eager tasters surrounded me. Hands reached out. Soon the platter was bare. Good thing I had two more loaves in the oven.

I took a taste of the half-slice I had managed to reserve for myself. Despite the slight cosmetic problems—it looked a little squashed—the potica had that familiar taste and aroma I knew and loved. The only question was how it would be received by others.

Everyone liked my potica. In fact, two of the most discerning tasters—Silvia, a friend from my language class, and Mia, our teacher, who were both born in Slovenia, gave me the ultimate compliment, toward the end of the workshop. Each one came up to me and told me quietly that mine was the one that most reminded them of the potica back home.

As for my personal story, it emerged gradually, during the course of the workshop, as I passed through the stages of creating my family's potica. Rolling the dough. Spreading the melted butter. Sprinkling on the walnut-sugar mix. The final drizzle of honey. Rolling it up. Back and forth to the kitchen, to check on the rising and the baking. In between, I wove in stories.

Each step of the way, I shared a little more. The misconceptions about Slovenia and Slovenians I'd had to unlearn. The many hardships my mother's family had faced in America. Poverty was only part of it. I didn't share too many grim details at first. But I opened the door. Later in the day, I loosened up and shared more, especially during one-on-one conversations, when I was able to talk about even the toughest parts of my family history.

It turned out that my fears about exposing too much were groundless. At the end of that long day at the Slovenian Hall, I came away feeling—for the first time—that I belonged to this community that I had embraced so late in life.

Maybe family stories—like recipes—are better when they are offered up through spoken words and actions. When they emerge naturally, in the course of rolling and baking and drinking and tasting. When one thing leads to another. Perhaps the full story is just a collection of tales. Links in a chain. Concentric circles, spiraling from outside to inside and back again.

I should have invited that persistent young man to follow me around for the rest of the day. To watch and listen. We would check out the other bakers. I might coach him while he tried his hand with the rolling pin. After lunch, I would show him my vintage cookbooks. That first one, *Woman's Glory*, that prompted my year of weekly ethnic dinners, five years earlier. The oldest and most fragile one, written in Slovene, with the brown pressed flower and the mass cards inside.

We could sip good Slovenian wine when the bottles appeared on the bar. We might find a seat in the small library upstairs, or perhaps a quiet corner in that big warm kitchen, while we waited for the potica to rise and bake. And then, at the end of the day, the moment of truth. The long-awaited tasting.

With the sweet smell of the past all around us, I would turn to him every now and then, take his arm and say, “Let me tell you a story.”

I didn’t do it then.

So let’s do it now, *dragi bralci in bralke*—dear readers, both men and women.

Let me tell you a story. The parts I shared that day and the parts I held back. And the parts I didn’t yet know.

Let me tell you the story.

My Mother's Original Potica Recipe

*My gunmetal green recipe box holds multiple handwritten copies of this recipe. The misspelling of the Slovenian name as "poteca" may be a reflection of the source, a Serbian American woman.*

*There is much that is left unsaid in this bare-bones recipe, which seems intended for an experienced baker who is already familiar with the end product and just needs a road map. It offers only a rough approximation of what my mother actually did. In fact, some options that seem to be offered—milk instead of sour cream in the dough, skipping the honey in the filling—would have been a sacrilege in my family. My mother was more generous with the cinnamon than the recipe suggests. And we always rolled the dough thinner than pie crust, not thicker. Clearly, my mother was drawing on her primary model—her own mother—when she crafted the yearly Christmas potica. (Don't worry—a more detailed and accurate recipe will follow.)*

*One of my potica recipe cards is in my mother's handwriting. It dates from a time when she could no longer make potica on her own, so I invited her to help me. Sometimes she took on one easy but critical task: drizzling just the right amount of honey on the sugar-nut filling layer, before I rolled up the dough. During one Christmas season, she noticed my recipe card looked ragged and faint, so she volunteered to copy it over. Neither of us said it aloud, but I know what we were both thinking: After she was gone, I would have this recipe in my mother's handwriting to remember her.*

Poteca (sic)

*2 -3/4 sticks butter, melted + cooled. Add  
1 c sugar  
6 eggs yolks  
1 1/2 c milk or sour cream*

*2 packages yeast in 3/4 c. warm milk & 1 t. sugar*

*Proof yeast, add to above ingredients*

*Add 6 c flour  
1 t salt*

*Knead dough. Divide into 4 parts. Wrap in waxed paper. Refrigerate overnight. Roll a bit thicker than pie crust. Spread each portion with 5 t melted butter & 1/4 of nut mixture. Drizzle with honey. Roll up, pinch ends. Let rise 1-1/4 hrs.*

*Bake 350 degrees-30 min. If necessary 10 more minutes at 325 degrees.*

*Filling*

*2 lbs. nuts, ground fine (6-1/2 c.)*

*1 -1/2 c sugar (1 c. if honey used)*

*1 t. cinnamon*

*salt*

II.

The Painting Above the Bar/ A Brief Primer About Slovenia

Step up to the bar, *dragi bralci in bralke*.

No, not to sample the wine. The hour is too early, even for the most heavy-drinking of Slovenians. The point of interest is behind the bar—that imposing painting on the wall. Just like the mirror below it and the old-fashioned bar itself, it extends almost the full width of the room.

That painting was the first thing that caught my eye when I first stepped into the Slovenian Hall more than a decade ago.

Initially, I was charmed. Then I was baffled. Take a look:

A man and a woman in old-fashioned dress are plowing the fields with a pair of oxen. Another man in the foreground stands near a vineyard. To the right, a workman with a wine cask on his back is heading up a winding path that leads to a two-story Alpine chalet. All around are rolling green hills. Mountains in the distance. Blue skies above.

The inviting panoramic landscape would have been the perfect representation of Switzerland. But surely not Slovenia. I had carried a single stark image of that mysterious place since childhood, cobbled together from the bits of information my mother doled out about her father's life in Europe, before he arrived in America in the early 1900s.

My mother's short, edited bio of her father went something like this:

Grandpa lived in a hut with a dirt floor in a village outside Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. One day, he broke his nose when he swung out on the bell rope of the church steeple and fell to the ground. His parents died in the influenza epidemic. After that, he was passed

around to some relatives until an older brother took him in. Then he took a boat to America, all by himself, at the age of eleven.

This truncated story was enough to crystallize a peculiar picture in my child's mind. Slovenia must be a flat, barren plain in the middle of nowhere. I imagined a monotonous landscape in shades of brown, with everything covered in dust and mud. The people were poor and sick. If I ever wanted to visit my grandfather's birthplace—not likely—I just had to look for the village with a church and a tall steeple.

For years, my impression of Slovenia didn't evolve much beyond that. Like most Americans, I would have struggled to find it on a map. George W. Bush once confused it with Slovakia. Even today, with a president whose wife is a Slovenian immigrant, this public murkiness persists. But Slovenia is not the same as Slovakia—or Serbia or Slavonia, although Slavic people do live in all these places. For much of my life, I was as hazy about these subtleties of European politics and geography as the next person. So here is a short primer about the misunderstood land of my ancestors.

If you happen to be Slovenian, just consider this a refresher.

*Slovenia is pretty small, right? And where is it again?*

Slovenia doesn't even qualify for the Top Ten list of Europe's smallest countries. But it is a small place by American standards, roughly the size of Switzerland or New Jersey. With a little over two million people, Slovenia has a population that falls somewhere between Greater Cleveland and the city of Chicago. It is bordered by Austria to the northwest, and, moving clockwise, by Hungary, Croatia, Italy, and a short stretch of the Adriatic Sea. Depending on whom you ask, it is located in Central Europe, Eastern Europe, or the Balkans.

For most of their history, Slovenians were a stateless people defined by their distinctive language, a Slavic tongue called Slovene or Slovenian. They remain very proud of it, despite the challenges and quirks. A joke I have heard around the Hall goes like this: “My people had to leave for America because they couldn’t learn the language back home!”

Most of present-day Slovenia used to be a province of Austria, a partner in the once-powerful Austro-Hungarian Empire. For people like my mother, who considered a Germanic identity more socially acceptable than a Slavic one, this historic fact provided a solution: just claim to be Austrian. Uneasy Slovenian Americans could even point to immigrant ancestors with “Austrian” or “from Austria-Hungary” on their travel documents. Slovenia, if mentioned at all, would be a notation in the language column on the steamship passenger list.

*Does this have some connection to Yugoslavia?*

Good question. It used to.

Following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of First World War, Slovenia became the northernmost part of a newly-created Balkan country, ruled by the Serbian monarchy. At first this cobbled-together country was called the Kingdom of the Serbs, the Croats and the Slovenes. For obvious reasons, a shorter name soon replaced it: Yugoslavia, which means “Land of the South Slavs.”

In Yugoslavia, the Second World War turned into a brutal civil war, an even greater calamity with many casualties. The country emerged as a federation of socialist republics under Josip Broz Tito, the anti-Nazi Resistance leader who morphed from war hero into Communist dictator. Slovenia, like the rest of Yugoslavia, remained largely hidden behind the Iron Curtain until it declared independence in 1991.

This was the first step in the protracted and often violent dismantling of Yugoslavia. One piece after another—Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro—broke away. The final chapter came in 2008, when Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia, once the dominant partner in the multi-ethnic Balkan nation.

*So now Slovenia is an actual separate country?*

Yes. At long last.

Out of all the former Yugoslav republics, Slovenia has fared the best. Their war for independence was short—ten days—and relatively bloodless. Always the most economically developed and western-identified, the new nation evolved into a stable democracy and in 2004 was the first of the successor states to be admitted to the European Union.

Well before Melania Trump's arrival in the White House, her small homeland had begun to position itself as a desirable travel destination. The days of being a hidden gem are long past. Slovenia beckons regularly to tourists from glossy publications like the New York Times travel section. It is the Sunny Side of the Alps. The Country with LOVE in its Name. Europe's Green Capital. A Biodiversity Hot Spot.

These carefully crafted phrases happen to be true. The Alps, the Mediterranean coast, virgin forests, and dramatic limestone caves really are within an hour's drive of Ljubljana, the charming capital city with the hard-to-pronounce name. And much of the country still looks like that picture over the bar—rolling, green and unspoiled.

*So why all the worry about being identified as Slovenian? Aren't they just an interesting little ethnic group from an up-and-coming corner of Europe? And here in the United States, there aren't too many of them around.*

Puzzling, isn't it?

In most parts of the United States, Slovenians are a small and, it must be admitted, a low-profile ethnic group. But there are exceptions, especially in Ohio, followed by a few other states, mostly in the Midwest. In mining towns and in bigger cities like Cleveland, Slovenians have been part of a visible community since the late 1890s, when they started to arrive in modest but significant numbers. They were a small stream in what would become a massive wave of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe that peaked in the early 1900s and came to a halt in 1924, with restrictive anti-immigrant legislation.

Today, the largest share of Slovenian Americans are the descendants of people who arrived as immigrants during this period, often associated with Ellis Island in the popular imagination. These so-called New Immigrants—poor and uneducated, from the countryside or small villages, usually Catholic (like most Slovenians) or Jewish—encountered prejudice and sometimes outright hostility. They were outsiders in a nation still dominated by white people with Anglo-Saxon Protestant roots. Slovenian immigrants faced the additional challenge of belonging to a very small linguistic and cultural group.

But Slovenians really made their mark in Cleveland. Their community expanded and some began to participate in public life. Inevitably, this translated into political influence. It turns out that a powerful Democrat named Frank Lausche, the son of immigrant parents named Lovše, was a dominant figure during all my years in Ohio. He had been mayor of Cleveland before I

was born, served as Ohio's governor for ten years, and was in the middle of a twelve-year stretch in the U.S. Senate when my family left for Chicago in the mid-1960s.

I had no idea.

If I had realized there were plenty of other people around with Slovenian ancestry—including a big shot like Lausche—I would have been even more puzzled about why it was supposed to be so hush-hush in my own family.

Even without knowing about all the Slovenians in high places in Ohio, I had plenty of questions.

My mother's "just say you're Austrian" line always confused me. I had grown up listening to stories of her high school accomplishments. In addition to being an honor student, she had been voted Most Popular Girl in her inner city high school graduating class. And, an even greater source of pride, she was runner-up for Most Frank. Like all her siblings, she had gone to college on scholarship. So why would a girl like that need to disguise the truth? And why choose to identify with the Austrians, if they had occupied her ancestral homeland?

Besides, my mother's parents were still living, and we didn't hide from them. On weekends, we regularly made the journey from the suburbs to gather at their small bungalow on Cleveland's east side, along with my aunts and uncles and their kids. True, my immigrant grandfather could be gruff and aloof. But my American-born grandmother was sweet and loving—and a wonderful cook. Potica and homemade white bread were the twin centerpieces of the spread she laid out at every family visit. We had good times, mostly centered around eating, at the home of the only Slovenians I knew.

Technically, of course, my mother's two brothers and her sister were also Slovenian—and all my cousins were half-and-half. But we never spoke of it at family gatherings. Not that I knew much about this mysterious stain that we were supposed to keep hidden. But I sensed from an early age that more of the family story had been shared with me than with anyone else.

I was the second oldest of twelve grandchildren, the first of the girls, the precocious firstborn in my own family—and, I expect, a bossy big sister. My mother treated me as a confidante. So it was inevitable that I would absorb more family lore than my two younger siblings—and more than any of our cousins, who weren't blessed with a parent who had the same need to be frank, at least when it suited her.

In fact, I suspected some of the cousins didn't even know their real last name.

My mother told my sibs and me the truth about that. The family's original surname was tough to sound out in English. My mother seemed to enjoy making us laugh when she tried to pronounce it like a proper Slovenian: Koz-ly'EEUW-chur. She sounded like someone putting on a pretend accent. Or maybe she was just mocking her father.

That's why the younger generation took the name "Church" instead. (Not the actual assumed name—I wouldn't dare!—but it's close enough.) According to my mother, the new name was just a short "anglicized" version of the hard-to-pronounce Slovenian original. She and her siblings had changed it legally. My grandparents used the new name informally, or so she claimed.

It was easy enough to sidestep the issue when the extended family gathered together at my grandparents' home, since we addressed them simply as Grandma and Grandpa. Still, it didn't feel right to abandon a family name. And why all the secrecy? It seemed unfair to keep my

cousins in the dark. Especially the offspring of my mother's brothers, who were walking around with a name that had been made up.

Didn't they have a right to know the truth?

I thought so. When I was about ten, I decided to take matters into my own hands.

But that's another story. To set the stage, let's go upstairs.

### III.

#### Telling Secrets

The staircase at the Slovenian Hall is broad and curving, with faux-granite steps, decorative mosaic inlays, and a polished wooden handrail running alongside. The 1920s building was originally a municipal water-pumping station, so perhaps that explains the air of faded grandeur.

The ascent is more impressive than the destination, a modest second level that is perhaps one third the size of the ground floor. The stairway ends at what is little more than a large landing, with a window that overlooks the high-ceiling banquet room down below. Three rooms open onto the landing: the library, a room for lodge meetings—and the women's restroom, a place of extravagant size in comparison to the closet-like facilities down below.

That upstairs restroom was designed as a classic old-fashioned ladies' lounge: A large mirrored outer room, opening directly onto the hallway, with a closed-off two-stall bathroom farther inside. The outer room is mostly empty now, with just a few unmatched pieces of

furniture. And it is no longer limited to women—as I discovered one night, when a pony-tailed man from the martial arts class walked in while I was making a phone call to my mother.

I like to imagine the lounge as it might have appeared in the past, when it was a private space for the immigrant and first-generation women whose images appear in the yellowing old photo albums in the library next door. There would have been overstuffed couches, for the comfort of Slovenian ladies who felt indisposed and needed to recline. Mirrors and tables, for women who wanted to freshen up before a polka dance. Comfortable chairs, for young mothers to nurse and change their babies. A refuge, perfect for women to gossip and share confidences.

A restroom is a good place for secrets, as I know well.

Long ago, in a bathroom in another Slovenian home, I shared my first family secret—with a girl cousin. She was one of the Church kids, two years younger than I.

We were upstairs in our grandparents' bungalow in Cleveland. The second floor had three bedrooms. Grandma's, the largest one, held a big dresser and a cozy double bed with a comforter. Grandpa got the small, cell-like room with a single bed. The third room, once shared by my mother and her younger sister, contained a sewing machine and a jumble of odds-and-ends.

There wasn't much reason for two little girls to be upstairs, except to visit the home's only bathroom. It was medium-sized, with an old-fashioned claw-foot bathtub, a sink, and a toilet. And a personalized bathroom rug.

Maybe it was the sight of that rug that triggered me. Or perhaps I had planned the conversation in advance and was just looking for an opportune moment to ambush my unsuspecting relative.

I stood in front of the loopy pink bathroom rug, with white cursive writing that boldly proclaimed the family surname. I hesitated for a moment and then plunged ahead.

“See that? Kozlevcar?” I pointed.

My cousin nodded.

“That’s your real name.”

Done. The secret was out.

Did I feel a touch of big girl smugness, as I enlightened my younger cousin? Probably. And a certain guilty *frisson*, for venturing into forbidden territory.

I don’t recall my cousin’s reaction. She remains the closest one, the only one in regular contact, and the sole family member who shares my interest in our Slovenian roots. So I was able to bring this incident up a few years ago, to see if she could remember any more details.

To my surprise, she no longer recalled the specific incident of the rug in the bathroom. But she was very clear that somehow, somewhere, I had been the one who revealed the family name to her. And she added something new, about what happened next.

When she told her father—the oldest son, the first to go to college, the first to change his name, and the one sibling who became wealthy—he cautioned her that she must never speak of it. If the original name were known, he said, it might hurt him in business.

So much for any lingering suspicions that this sensitivity about being Slovenian was just my mother’s issue. Or that my over-identification with her led me to take it too seriously. This was clearly a shared anxiety in her family, resting on strong convictions about what was necessary to survive and flourish in America.

My mother struggled with powerful ambivalence. She urged discretion, but she was at least willing to talk to her children about being Slovenian. And she left a trail of breadcrumbs: a

handful of family names and places that became a series of clues, a pathway for anyone who chose to follow it. But for her older brother, that telltale family name seems to have been treated like classified government information, a secret as dangerous and hard to contain as radioactive gas.

A few years ago, I came across my uncle's marriage license while I was searching online for older family records. It wasn't surprising that the surname he provided for his father matched his own. As far as his marriage was concerned, that awkward Kozlevcar name had been erased. But my uncle took it a step further. He had also changed the maiden names of his mother and his Czech mother-in-law. Adamic became Adams. Horvath became Hoover. He was covering his tracks. Looking out for his family. Trying to pass.

That bathroom conversation was my first clear memory of what would become a familiar struggle. I could be a good girl who followed the rules and left well enough alone. Or I could put the truth first, no matter how uncomfortable it might be.

Do we ever arrive at the truth about our family's past? I used to think of it as an uncovering. An excavation. But now I know better. It is sculpting. Adding and taking away. Fashioning an ever-evolving vision of a reality that is always receding into the past, even as it comes into sharper focus.

My family's truth arrived in pieces. It started with my mother's offhand revelations. Followed by my own persistent questioning. A search for old documents. DNA testing. Travel. And always food, both a touchstone and a route to understanding. All in search of this elusive and mysterious Slovenian-ness, and its place in the larger story of my family, my mother and myself.

*EDCS Potica Workshop, 3-12-16*

## *WALNUT HONEY POTICA*

*A Five Generation Family Tradition from Blair Kilpatrick*

**Source:** *My mother Alice, age 93, in the style of her mother, Mary Adamic Kozlevcar (and her mother Jožefa.)*

**Regions:** *My mother's ancestors were all turn-of-the century immigrants from small settlements in rural Dolenjska. In America, they lived in mining communities in Minnesota and Pennsylvania and finally settled in Cleveland.*

**Comments:** *I grew up in Cleveland and have never known Christmas without potica. I've been baking it for forty years—and I'm still trying to measure up to my mother and my grandma! Without potica, our Slovenian heritage would have disappeared. Instead, we have a 5th generation of potica bakers, my son and a nephew, who carry on.*

**More:** *For photos and more details, see "Potica: A Step-by-Step Guide to Slovenian Nut Roll," on the home page of my Slovenian Roots Quest blog (<http://slovenianroots.blogspot.com>.) Many other Slovenian recipes can be found there.*

### *Dough*

*1 cup plus 6 tablespoons butter, melted and cooled*

*1 cup sugar*

*6 egg yolks*

*1-1/2 cups sour cream*

*2 packages dry yeast*

*3/4 cup warm milk*

*1 teaspoon sugar*

*6 cups flour, plus more for kneading*

*1 teaspoon salt*

*In a large bowl, combine butter, sugar, egg yolks, and sour cream. Mix well and set aside. In a small bowl, proof yeast in warm milk and sugar. Add yeast to the first mixture in the large bowl and mix well. Sift flour and salt together, add to the mixture in the large bowl, and stir to combine. You should have a soft, sticky dough. Turn dough out on a floured board and knead until smooth and elastic. Divide dough into four even balls and flatten them slightly. Wrap in plastic wrap. Refrigerate overnight.*

Filling

*2 pounds (about 6-1/2 cups) finely ground walnuts, combined with:*

*1 cup sugar*

*1 tablespoon cinnamon*

*dash of salt (optional)*

*-plus-*

*1/2 cup melted butter*

*honey to taste, 1/2 to 1 cup*

*Remove a portion of dough from refrigerator and place it on floured surface. Roll it into a rectangle. The dough should be thinner than pie crust but thicker than strudel or phyllo. (15 x 26 inches is a good size.) Spread the dough with 2 tablespoons melted butter and a quarter of the nut/sugar mixture, which should be about 2 cups. Drizzle the dough with 2-4 tablespoons of honey.*

*Roll up the dough, beginning from the short end. After every few turns, prick the dough with a fork to eliminate air bubbles. Pinch seam and ends closed and fold ends under. Place seam side down on baking sheet or rectangular pan that has been oiled or lined with parchment paper. Repeat with remaining balls of dough, for a total of four loaves.*

*Let potica rise 1-1/4 hours. (Note: Loaves don't rise much.) Bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes. If necessary, bake for 10 minutes more at 325 degrees. Let cool before slicing. To store, wrap in aluminum foil. This style of potica tastes better the next day. It stores—and freezes—very well. Dober tek!*

*—For the EDCS Potica Workshop, 3-12-16*

