

MY UNCLE POLDÉ

FRANK MLAKAR

I REMEMBER that I was the first to see him the night he came. He stood there quietly just inside the door, waiting for someone to notice him. Relatives, friends from all over Cleveland crowded our small house for it was the celebration of my father's name day. *Sveti Janez*—St. John's Day! The table was piled high with roast fowl, coils of Slovenian sausage, hams, fruit, mounds of *potitsa* and other pastries; and down the middle of the table marched a row of jugs filled with delicious home-made wine.

My father bustled from this group to that, greeting old friends, pressing them with more to eat. But already the guests were beginning to sit back from the table and pat their stomachs, laughing and giggling in spite of themselves as they gossiped about each other's illnesses and calamities.

My mother darted in and out of the room; she was everywhere with more food, more drink, laughing and coaxing. She ran over to me. "Do you like it?" she whispered gayly, with a little mock-bow.

When she lifted her head a cry broke from her. Her eyes were fixed on the tall thin man who stood in the doorway. I saw she was trembling.

My mother cried out, "Poldé!"

The man gave a start, turned himself toward her. He was weeping as she embraced him.

The room quieted. My mother at last lifted her head to look up at the man, smiled tearfully, and taking him by the arm led him to my father.

"Janez," she said, "this is my brother Poldé!"

My father gave a cry of gladness. He turned to the guests. "Now we really have something to celebrate!" he shouted. "This is Anitsa's brother from the old country." He dragged his new-found brother-in-law to my brother and me. Tony, three years older than I, had his arm round my shoulder. My father started the introductions before he reached us. "Here are my boys, Poldé. Tony is the big one, and this is Paul, who is sixteen."

Uncle Poldé embraced us, murmured a greeting and turned his face back to my father, who led him to the big table.

The guests immediately crowded round them, plying Uncle Poldé with questions about himself, the old country, their mutual friends. "When did you leave?" "How are things in Mala Vas?" "How are the Podpadecs who ran the mill? Where are the . . ."

Uncle Poldé twisted his big hands with embarrassment, evaded several of these questions, and then said abruptly, "I've been living in Trieste the past few years."

But Funtek the grocer was not to be put off in this way.

"Poldé," he persisted, "do you remember? We were boys together—"

Uncle Poldé's eyes dropped to the floor.

"Yes!" cried Funtek. "Why, it must be twenty years—" His wife broke in, grabbing him by the arm. "There'll be time enough for that later," she said. "Let Poldé alone," and when he protested, she spun him round and took him away.

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Uncle Poldé smiled weakly, sat down to the table. After a moment the distressed look passed from my mother's face, too; she set a few dishes before him and he began to eat.

Soon there was a general burst of talk again. But the jollity seemed a bit different now. Puzzled looks were thrown at Uncle Poldé. Funtek still grumbled to himself. This was indeed a strange immigrant! Most of them were glad to see familiar faces again after the long trip to America; they did not behave like this! I could feel my mother's own bafflement.

As though aware of the impression he had made, and regretting it, Uncle Poldé commenced to talk loudly to my father. "So this is America?" he exclaimed. "Do you always eat so well?"

someone pressed him with a reference to their old days in Slovenia, he pleaded weariness. "I don't see why you have to be so quiet," said Funtek, disgruntled.

Only my father seemed really undisturbed by Uncle Poldé's behavior. He was tired by the excitement of the evening and said quite matter-of-factly when the guests had gone, "It was a good party. Now let's go to bed. Tony and I start work at six."

In the morning, when I left for school, Uncle Poldé was still sleeping.

We did not learn any more about him in the next few days. He did not tell my mother where he had been the many years she had not heard from him, nor why he had come to America. She continued to regard him with a wondering look.

He did not talk much. At noon when I



My father waved a deprecating hand and said pompously, "This is an occasion, but I can't say we ever starve."

At midnight the guests began to leave. Many of them came to Uncle Poldé once more for a final word. He appeared to have lost some of his tenseness, but when

came home for lunch I would find him seated at the table, chin cupped in his bony hands. Sometimes, however, he would begin abruptly to tell about something he had seen that day. He talked and talked then. "A strange place, this America," he said once, shaking his head.

"People here walk about with the look of nobility on their faces, more sure of themselves than the counts and princes back home in Slovenia. Where do they get this look? Even the penniless seem to act as if they'd not be at all surprised to meet a miracle face to face." This look that he thought he detected on the faces of Americans appeared to interest Uncle Poldé a great deal. In fact, he said, some of the members of the Slovenian colony in Cleveland were different people now; he did not recognize them. "In the old country they bowed their backs, resigned to their old place in the world. Here in America they step out like new men." He waited a moment, then added, "Does this happen to everybody in America?"

He spent most of his time wandering about the city. At night he came home tired, but trembling with excitement, his face alight, burning with anticipation. By morning all this seemed to have burned itself out, as though it were too much for him to hold. He came downstairs with a dead look on him, his eyes dull as ashes.

Uncle Poldé said nothing about getting a job. My father suggested to him that Tony might be able to help him find one at the factory where he worked. Uncle Poldé said, "Yes," quietly, and went up to the little attic room we had prepared for him.

When Tony came home one day and told him he could start work the following morning, Uncle Poldé nodded his head, and went upstairs to sort out the proper clothes.

His room in the attic was small. The roof with its ribs of uncovered rafters sloped steeply and he could stand erect only in the middle of the floor. But this did not seem to bother him. He was in the habit of walking around with his head dropped on his chest. There was little furniture in the place: a chair, a shaky

chest of drawers, the wicker basket he had brought with him from the old country, a cot pushed under the rafters. But he never grumbled.

One night, a couple of months after his arrival, my mother sent me up to see him. I climbed the tight little stairway. Approaching the door, I heard a muffled crying.

"Uncle Poldé!" I shouted.

After a moment he bade me come in. He was lying on his side on the narrow cot, his bony knees drawn up to his chin.

"Come in, Pavlek," he said.

"Call me Paul," I said. "My name is Paul."

"In Slovenian it's Pavlek," he insisted.

"Only hunkies say Pavlek!"

"You're not a hunky, whatever that may be," he insisted. "You're a Slovenian."

"I'm not!" I shouted. "I'm an American!"

He sat up, his head almost hitting a rafter. "Tell me, Pavlek," he said with intense interest, "what is this thing—to be an American?" The muscles over his face flickered with eagerness.

"You've got to be born here," I said.

"No, no," he protested. "It's something else. You can feel it, almost hold it in your hands sometimes."

"Or else you have to be made a citizen, like my father," I said.

Uncle Poldé was not satisfied.

"What were you crying about?" I said abruptly.

"Crying? I was crying, Pavlek?"

"I heard you," I said.

He looked at me. "But I was laughing!" he cried. "I was thinking to myself how ridiculous it is a peasant like me should be making so much money in America."

I left him then.

His days so far as we knew were all the same. Mornings, shod in his clumsy thick shoes he clumped out of the house, down

the street to the stamping factory where for nine hours each day he swept the steel chips from under machines, emptied the waste barrels.

When he had been doing this a few months, my father said to him, "Poldé, it's time you asked for a better job." Poldé nodded understandingly. "I will," he promised. After some days, however, he confessed that he could not bring himself to do it. My father gave an angry exclamation. "Poldé, in America it's taken for granted you want to get ahead!" When Uncle Poldé sighed that he just couldn't do it, not yet, my father grunted in disgust and left him.

Nor could any of us understand just why things as simple as this bothered him. In fact, we could not understand him at all. We would have liked him to find other lodgings. "Joy sits as well on that man's face as a saddle on the back of a mule," complained my father. But Uncle Poldé gave no signs of leaving, although he once asked my mother if he could not stay with us at least till he began to feel a bit more at home in the city.

My mother, her face red with embarrassment, complied.

Now and then Uncle Poldé mingled with other people, his face tightening with eagerness when someone spoke to him and encouraged his company. On Saturday nights, like most bachelors in the Slovenian colony, he went to the dances held in the National Home by the various lodges, dramatic and singing societies. My mother, who was a member of several such groups, also went frequently.

Here, while gyrating furiously in a polka, his thin face never lost its sad dignity. It wasn't long before the American-born kids in the hall got nerve enough to mimic him, prancing madly up and down the floor, holding their faces in a desperately calm look. Now and then one of them exploded with laughter. Scolded

only mildly by their amused parents, they became bolder and slid across the floor under his nose, their arms pumping up and down, their feet churning in comically long steps.

Uncle Poldé finished the dance, took the giggling girl to her parents, trudged to my mother and said, "I'm going home, Anitsa." There were some then who grinned broadly as he left, but as many turned their faces away.

As time passed, now and again I began to find myself going up to his room, with no purpose in mind but somehow attracted to him. "*Kai chesh?*" he would ask—"What do you want?"—the bony outlines of his face softening with kindness and then, unexpectedly, lighting up with curiosity, for he was not used to having people seek him out. I could not tell him why I had come.

"You're a strange little one, Pavlek. So quiet, always listening, peering into books. You know already, don't you, what it is to be sad and lonely." It was late; he was tired from a long walk, but his eyes were alive and warm.

He sighed. "And I'm no better."

In a dim way I knew how he felt.

"When I was a little boy I was even more lonely. I was a *yetskatch*—a stutterer. Talking to the cattle I grazed, I could speak well. But most of the time I couldn't get a word out, even to ask my mother for bread. At night, Father insisted each member of the family take his turn saying the vesper prayer. When it came to me, I pleaded with God. 'Please God,' I cried, 'I am saying Thy Name. Please don't let me stutter on Thy Name!' As I started to pray my brother and sisters began to laugh and whisper 'G-G-God' among themselves. That was the way I said it in my praying. Then, when I got the Amen out, Father cuffed me till my ears rang to beat this perverseness out

of me. I would run to the barn to hide myself."

"But you don't stutter now," I said.

"No," he said. Then he was quiet.

"No, not now." He looked into my face. And for almost the first time I looked directly into his eyes.

"It was not long before I learned that God had put me on earth for a purpose. He shared me with the peasants. I was not a humpback nor a dwarf, but I was to be laughed at. Because I could not talk. . . .

"As I grew older and more shy, my stuttering got worse. Sometimes I could not talk at all. And then one day when a gang of schoolboys laughed at me, unaccountably I began to laugh with them. Inwardly for the moment I seemed to be quite calm. I felt lifted outside myself. There I stood, apart from the yelling boys, watching myself; Poldek Struna. I could see him—

"A comical figure indeed—his poor jaw bouncing up and down, with not a word coming out of him. Then this Poldek I watched laughed harder and harder. The boys began to gaze at him stupidly. Big tears rolled down his cheeks. Now I knew why God laughed, why people laughed. The stutterer! Looking so miserable, working so hard at something even a child could do; grinding his jaws, pursing his lips, bobbing his head—all to force out a few words. The Poldek I was watching laughed till he began to choke. And then he said, 'Oh, but it is funny!'

"And he spoke plainly.

"For a moment the boys and I, too, were struck dumb with amazement. Then I shrieked with the biggest laughter of them all. I knew of a sudden I would never stutter again. This was the secret God had kept from me: I had been put on earth to be laughed at, to be enjoyed.

"But I did not want to be laughed at for stuttering.

"That was the way it started. I goaded myself on and on with crazy stunts till I became known in every village through the valley. People laughed at everything I did, even when I forgot myself and tried to be serious. They began to laugh when they caught sight of me. Father cuffed me from morning till night, but if anything I got even more wild. I never stuttered now. I had learned to forget myself in the clown, who did not fear words. Soon I no longer needed any goading.

"But then one day when I was eighteen a great sadness swept over me. That was the greatest joke of all! What business did a fool have being sad? The neighbors pleaded, 'Why are you sad, Poldé Struna?' 'Have you fallen in love, Poldé Struna?' I began to laugh again, but this time my laughter was close to tears. In that one clear moment I had glimpsed that the clown was running away with me, destroying all that had been real in me. I had sold myself for a laugh. I was no longer Poldé Struna, but a stranger. I began to cry and the peasants slowly moved away.

"I did not know how to change myself back to Poldé Struna. I had learned not to fear words and syllables, so I did not stutter now. But I could not get back into the real Poldé Struna. It was the clown who spoke, who acted.

"I left for Trieste, where nobody knew me, as a clown or anything else. I stopped myself from laughing, acting foolishly. But this was worse, for now I had not even the comfort of being a clown. I was nothing. Not even the old unhappy, miserable Poldé.

"Then I met a man. He had been to America. I watched him, the way he swung his shoulders through the crowds, how he stared down with his eyes the petty officials who demanded from him a more fitting respect. I had given many names to this thing I saw he carried in himself. I wanted it. It showed itself in

his walk, in the way he looked at you. He called it America.

"I decided to go to this land of miracles. I had heard stories of men who had gone there and lifted themselves up in spite of what they had been. Perhaps I could do the same: become another man, a better one. It was my last chance.

"So I came. And what am I?

"A laborer sweeping floors, afraid to speak up for myself, afraid to become a real person though I want to, afraid to take the chance that will determine once and for all whether or not I'm really good inside. I had thought America would change me. I know now it is men themselves who must change, who must measure up to America's bigness. That is why they lift themselves up, to meet that bigness."

The next morning I could say nothing to him when we met.

Impulsively, I knocked on his door that evening. He opened it. His shoulders were tremendously stooped, his arms hung at his sides. He stared at me with heavy tired eyes, then motioned me to come in, as though he scarcely expected me to. At the same time his eyes seemed to blaze in a way I had never seen before.

"Sit down on the bed, Pavlek, and let me talk to you. You are closer to me than anyone here.

"I'm grateful to you, Pavlek, and to your America, to you and your pride in being an American. But you were wrong when you said one needed to be born here to be an American. It is America that is born in men. It was in me a long time before I ever saw America. I could have been born in Poland, Russia, China; with a white face, black face or a yellow face; it would have been the same. Always America is there for anyone who has the strength to reach to it in himself. That is what I have learned here, watching the

people in the streets, their ways of walking and talking, speaking up for themselves, measuring the America within themselves up to the bigness outside, and growing, growing. That is why I had to come here, to learn this."

The next few days Uncle Poldé was almost cheerful. He carried a secret smile on his lips. But soon he turned moody again, already discouraged. He tried to explain himself to me. "Pavlek, where does one begin—?"

My mother invited him downstairs, to draw him out of his attic but he waited



till it was dark before he took a short walk and came right back again. He was ashamed to face me. A gloom settled on our house.

My father began to feel sorry for him and tried to get him to talk, but Uncle Poldé dismissed each pleasantry with a dismal nod of his head.

We could not smile without feeling guilt. His sad figure forever intruded.

My brother related that at the factory

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the workers no longer chafed Uncle Poldé, but regarded him uneasily.

He covered us like a shadow.

Then, early one afternoon my brother came running home from work. He made straight for my mother, began to tell her something that had to do with Uncle Poldé.

We feared the worst.

My brother could hardly talk. Finally we made out that Uncle Poldé had clouted the foreman and left the factory.

"He was working," started my brother again, "when the man began to nag him. And for good reasons, too. Uncle Poldé's been working like a dreamer these last few days. The foreman gave it to him good and hard. He said things nobody decent would stand for. But Uncle Poldé did nothing. He listened. Then, of a sudden, as though something had been mounting up in him, Uncle Poldé lifted himself, stretched to his full height. He grinned from ear to ear so that his whole face was changed, and brought his fist down on the man's head, knocking him down, and then he strode out of the shop, with that grin still on his face."

When Tony finished, my mother said

nothing. She went into her room. Tony and I looked at each other.

For the rest of the afternoon we waited for Uncle Poldé. My father returned from work and we had supper. There was little talk. No one knew what to say.

Finally, about ten o'clock, Uncle Poldé came in and went upstairs to his room. I followed him. He heard me coming and held the door open for me. "Come in," he said, a smile playing over his lips.

He was packing his belongings in the wicker basket he had brought with him from the old country. "It is done," he said. He strode across the attic floor, almost knocking his head against the rafters. It was the first time I had seen him stretched so tall. He glanced about him. "I'll need a bigger room," he said.

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Kurt Werth is the illustrator.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

One of democracy's cherished rights is that of its citizens to express themselves freely on any subject—from a ball game to a Presidential election. Through the press, the radio, the ballot box. . . on the platform, on Main Street. . . in the city square, at Town Meeting. . . here is where America decides its issues; here is where its laws are made, its leaders chosen, its destiny shaped. In the tiniest hamlet as in the most crowded city, the people are the ultimate authority. They may speak in different languages. But their voice is one voice—a free people united.

FOREIGN-LANGUAGE RADIO AND THE WAR

CARL J. FRIEDRICH

As you turn the dial of your radio, you will hear, from time to time throughout America, the sound of voices talking an alien tongue. Most frequently you will hear Italian and Spanish, Polish and Yiddish. Often your ear will catch the Scandinavian languages, German, or French; sometimes Russian, Greek, Portuguese, Czech, Lithuanian, Finnish, and other tongues. You may be merely annoyed, or you may try to catch the foreign sounds with interest in their message. If you do, you will hear much the same fare that the radio offers in English. The voices are a vivid symbol of the freedom that is ours, the freedom of a people from many lands.

There are those who would insist these voices have no right to be heard here, that everyone should speak English or get off the air. Only the other day in a Congressional hearing, Representative Martin J. Kennedy of New York expressed this view.

Here is the crux of the issue for democracy. To what extent is the majority justified in imposing its cultural preferences upon the minority? Louis Adamic has put the answer broadly: "America has always welcomed diversity, variety, differences." Perhaps there is a bit of wishful thinking here; for America has been torn between the generous view set forth by Adamic—a view celebrated in immortal poetry by Walt Whitman—and the narrow view symbolized by the KKK, and voiced at present by such men as Pegler. It is, therefore, hardly surprising

that the problem of foreign-language broadcasting should have become highly controversial, with the nativists howling for its immediate suppression.

A strong and genuine democracy is, however, not only found in the ready acceptance of the will of the majority, but also in a scrupulous regard for the feelings and convictions of its minorities. As Edward Heimann has put it: "No majority, unless it abrogates democracy, can decide to kill the members of the minority. . . to repeal the rights of national or religious groups or to prohibit the free and dignified expression of independent and possibly non-conformist opinions."

What more important right in the whole field of freedom of expression is there than the right to communicate with each other in a language one understands? No matter how ardently we may desire that all our immigrants and their children should learn the language of Shakespeare and of Lincoln—and I for one certainly do desire this most strongly—we cannot close our eyes to the hard facts. An Italian or Russian or German who came here without much schooling, who was immediately confronted with the hard struggle of winning an immigrant's livelihood, has had little chance to learn another language. His background was against it; there was little free time and leisure, even if there was the ability. (See letter to Louis Adamic, page 88. Ed.) If he married a girl of his own folk, their love-making and all the other intimacies of living together were not likely to be