11

No Monuments, No History, No Past: Monuments and Memory

Božidar Jezernik

Public monuments, that is to say, statues or groups of statues designed in memory of a specific historical event or person and placed in a public space, form an important – perhaps even necessary – inventory of the modern nation. In addition to schools, museums and theatres, they represent the official culture of a particular state, and help to construct the collective memory of its inhabitants. By presenting specific personalities and events they determine which among them are of broader social significance, and thus are influential in determining how individual social communities evaluate their own history. ‘Until recently,’ suggests David Lowenthal, ‘most monuments were exhortations to imitate the virtues they commemorated; they reminded people what to believe and how to behave’ (Lowenthal 1985: 322).

The Ancient Greeks, for a ‘memorial’ used the word μνήμειο, which derives from the word μνήμη, which means ‘memory’ (Wenham 1977: 17). Similarly, in Latin, the word monumentum (hence the Italian and Spanish word monumento and the English and French monument) is linked to the word moneo, ‘I recall’, while the German expression Denkmal is associated with denken, ‘to think’ (Brown 1905: 18; see also Čopič 2000: 17). The link between spomenik (‘monument’) and spomin (‘memory’) is also evident in Slovenian and in other Slavic languages.

A monument to a specific person or event, placed in a public space, serves as a materialisation of the social memory of a particular social community; this is, indeed, a fundamental element of the identity of individuals and society. Without memory, we do not know either who we are or from where we come; and if we do not know this, then we also do not know where we are going. At the same time, however, the monument and the space in which it stands are both living their life in changing times. With the new generations they share a changing
political fate: historical changes may have as a consequence a change in the symbolic significance both of the monument and of the person it represents. Political symbols, namely, reflect and represent the prevailing ideology and its changes, therefore, particularly following revolutionary upheavals, it may well happen that particular monuments no longer harmonise with the altered historical and ideological context within a specific social environment.

Symbolic links with the past

As a rule, resurgent national and ethnic alliances require symbolic links with the past which serves as a living spring supplying the essential elements of national mythologies (see Lowenthal 1985: 396; 1996: 58). During the nineteenth century, Slovenian nationalism was emphatically apolitical and concentrated its efforts on the cultural field, giving priority to men of letters such as the ‘first Slovenian poet’, Valentin Vodnik (1758–1819), ‘foremost Slovenian poet’, France Prešeren (1800–1848), and the ‘creator of the Slovenian written language’, Primož Trubar (1508–1585). The famous American war correspondent, William Shirer, who visited Ljubljana on 10 March 1938, called it ‘a town to shame the whole world’. He said that Ljubljana was ‘full of statues and not one of them of a soldier. Only poets and thinkers have been so honoured’ (1988: 95). Shirer cannot have realised that the Slovenian liberal bourgeoisie were using culture as part of a strategy to assure people who had no political definition before 1848 that they did, indeed, enjoy a national identity. Likewise, it seems, he jumped to conclusions about Ljubljana’s statues before he had seen all, for up to the end of the 1880s the most popular statue in the city was that of the Austrian field marshal, Count Radecký (1766–1858). Marshal Radecký had close links with Slovenia: he was married to Countess Franziska Strasold, a native of Carniola, and inherited considerable property there; he thus acquired Carniolan citizenship in 1807. Marshal Radecký was very popular with Slovenian soldiers who placed full reliance upon him. His exploits were celebrated in folk songs like, for example:

Radecký is a real gentleman,
he will prevail every time, everywhere... (Lampe 1892: 324)

In 1852 the people of Ljubljana erected a life-size statue of Count Radecký in marshal’s uniform in Zvezda Park. Six years later, the municipality decided that this statue was not really a worthy monument,