

The Society to Preserve the Millvale Murals of Maxo Vanka

75th Anniversary Speaker Series

War and Class in Maxo Vanka's 1941 Murals

By Dr. Charles McCollester

Prologue:

I feel a deep personal affinity with Vanka who Adamic described as “a species of mystic who swung gracefully between intellectual agnosticism and a profound peasant-like faith in God, the Virgin, and all the saints and angels in Heaven.” In my case, with deeply Catholic parents and twenty years of Catholic education culminating in a doctorate on Jewish philosophy at the Catholic University of Louvain, I share with Vanka and his great friend Louis Adamic a deep yearning for a social order where greed is restrained, racism eliminated, where undefiled nature is understood as the sacred root of our earthly existence, where the nobility of physical labor is recognized, and where womanhood/motherhood is understood as the central factor in human survival.

Three people were critical to Vanka’s achievement at St. Nicholas in Millvale:

First, it was the progressive Franciscan **Fr. Zagar** who opened the door to his church and stood staunchly in support of the powerful and multi-faceted vision that Maxo unveiled on the walls, arches and ceilings of the building. Louis Adamic described him as “intelligent, simple, direct, well-intentioned and beloved.”

Second, and perhaps most important was the extraordinary **Margaret Stetten**, “a most untrifling person,” who fell in love with Maxo at first sight and whose understanding of his genius and her dedication to sharing it with America was not to be denied. Margaret, as the daughter of a well-known Jewish, Park Avenue physician and surgeon, had a trust fund that allowed her an independent existence. Adamic described her as a “buxom young woman in her late twenties: frank, simple, direct...patient, generous, without ambition for herself; immensely healthy and natural, deeply and quietly purposeful.”

Third, Louis Adamic was an insightful Slovenian-American writer on labor struggles and the immigrant experience in America. In the 1930s he wrote in-depth articles on organizing drives by rubber and autoworkers, the militancy of west coast longshoremen, the political struggles inside craft union organizations that led to the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) as well as fascinating local stories about “bootleg” coal diggers in Pennsylvania’s anthracite region. These articles were collected in his book *My America*. Another book *Dynamite* explored the issue of violence in labor’s struggles. Adamic’s relationship with Vanka combined a deep friendship with an ardent promotional interest. He perceived in his friend both a great soul and a great story.

Adamic helped lure Vanka to America in 1934, and his introduction of the artist to Fr. Zagar made the masterpiece of St. Nicholas possible

War

In 1941, Maxo Vanka came to Millvale beginning the second set of 11 murals on July 3 and completing his masterwork in four and half months on November 16, less three weeks before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. War's horrors weighed heavy on his consciousness. Three months prior to Vanka's arrival in Millvale, on April 6, Hitler's legions, following the annexation of Czechoslovakia and Austria, the partition of Poland, and fresh from the conquest of France, invaded Yugoslavia crushing the Royal Yugoslavia army in three weeks with air power and mechanized blitzkrieg.

Mati – Mother 1941

The death's-head legions
Of goose-stepping violence,
Hard calculations of oil and steel.
An insatiable hunger for victims,
But it's the woman who pays.
No soldier's glory or medals for her.
Rape, submission, crucifixion.
Mother of our native land,
Weeping in this valley of tears.

Portraying themselves as liberators of Croatia from Serb domination, the Nazis did not bomb Zagreb. They installed the fascist Croatian Ustashe party with puppet Ante Pavelich as dictator. The Nazi conquest was confined to the cities and towns as Hitler concentrated his forces to invade Russia on June 22. A vigorous partisan guerilla resistance in the rugged countryside led by Josip Broz Tito, a Croatian Communist, opened the way for an independent, neutral Communist regime in Yugoslavia. Left-right divisions inside Croatia resonated in Millvale's congregation, but St. Nicholas pastor Father Zadar's staunch support for Vanka overcame opposition to the painter's powerful anti-war and anti-capitalist vision.

While Vanka's eleven 1937 murals included an anti-war mural "The Croatian Mother raises her sons for war" set as a realistic counterpoint to the highly expressionist Pieta where Mary is surrounded by the pointed swords of her seven sorrows, this image of the dead soldier returning home to his mother to die recalls the carnage of World War I where Croatian soldiers were heavily engaged on the Italian front. These events were still a painful memory 20 years later in 1937. The horrific anti-war murals of 1941, **Mati**, the **Battlefield** and **Injustice** however, are not based on bitter memory, but they are expressions of an open bleeding wound.

Class

Vanka had a profound and almost unique sense of social class.

He led at least four distinct lives:

- 1.) **Fachook – Bastard** An illegitimate child of the highest levels of Austro-Hungarian Hapsburg nobility. Farmed out to an extremely impoverished village that generally got rid of the babies sent there – infanticide provided an important source of income. Vanka was fortunate to have small sums sent irregularly which the midwife who had birthed him did not steal. He was most fortunate to have an adoptive mother who came to love him passionately. “Dora developed a warm affection for me immediately after she got me. I smiled to her when I was not yet three months old. She nursed me at her bosom a long time because she liked the way I suckled...Though frail, I had in me intense life, which made me attractive in her eyes and heart; she was life itself, hence my mother.”
- 2.) **Prince:** At the age of eight, his birth mother’s aristocrat father discovers his existence and plucks him from extreme poverty and establishes him in a family manor with an overseer, serfs and tutors where he develops artistic skills and learns multiple languages. A young priest, a beloved spiritual advisor, encourages his love of nature and is the first to witness Maxi’s extraordinary ability to attract birds that ate from his hands and rested on his shoulders – his gift of sympathy for all living things.
- 3.) **Art Student:** After nine years as master of a small feudal domain where he refuses to treat his peasant workers as serfs, but tries to treat them as equals and finally succeeds in increasing their share of the harvests they can keep. At 18 years old, he is sent to the well-regarded art academy in Zagreb run by the world famous sculptor Ivan Mestrovic. While a student, he travels extensively in France, Italy and Greece. In 1910, at the age of 21, he is sent to the Royal Academy of Art in Brussels where Queen Elizabeth of the Belgians acts as his protector. Fellow students there give him the nickname INRI Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews because of his physical and spiritual resemblance to Jesus. In August 1914, Germany’s brutal invasion of Belgium, including the burning of Louvain/Leuven (where I studied and received the doctorate in philosophy) and its medieval library, subjects Vanka to the direct experience of war. Queen Elizabeth becomes famous as the Nurse Queen as she cares for wounded soldiers. She obtains a position for Vanka as a Red Cross ambulance driver. Queen Elizabeth, though of Bavarian origins, remains faithful to her Belgian subjects. However, through her Hapsburg connections she obtains safe passage for Vanka back to Croatia (in a train full of Croatian coal miners expelled from Belgium by the Germans) and secures his exemption from military service.

4.) Artist/Painter: In Croatia, Vanka reunites with Dora, his peasant mother, helps educate her other children and builds her a cottage. After losing most of his inherited wealth in the 1920s with the collapse of the Empire and resulting financial crisis, he obtains a teaching position at the Zagreb Academy of Art where he lives a modest middle class professor's life until 1931 when the indomitable Margaret Stetten enters his life. They marry and in 1932, their daughter Peggy is born only two months after Adamic and his wife are guests of the Vankas on the magical isle of Korchula, purported birthplace of Marco Polo.

America: Vanka resists leaving Zagreb for two years, not wanting to become dependent on Margaret's money. Margaret and Adamic, however, combine to get him to come to New York in 1934 where he has exhibits in New York and Pittsburgh. He is thrilled with America and paints mostly bums in the "Hoovervilles," white and Negro workers, and prostitutes. Adamic takes Vanka on some of his lecture and writing trips, which is how he first sees Pittsburgh. "Pittsburgh – with its great smoking, flaming steel mills and its ugliness which is so honest and intense" – excited Maxo even more than New York.

Inequalities of Class fuel the Horrors of War

The 1941 murals include brutal depictions of war: **Mati 1941, Injustice** and the **Battlefield** under the choir where Mary is a fearsome militant anti-warrior with an unfeminine, holy rage at the crucifixion and mutilation of her son by soldiers wearing crosses and scapulars. Underlying the horrors of war lurks the profound inequalities of class and wealth.

Injustice

There she stands, the modern horror:
 Toxic gas, the bloody sword,
 Bloody hands and bloodshot eyes.
 Gold outweighs bread.
 The tipped scale, the ancient imbalance,
 Feeds gut-hungry desperation.
 Bellows of fear stoke the flames of war,
 The cold poisoned breath
 Of violence and death.

Gold outweighs bread. In the Old Testament mural of 1941, God reveals his commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill" while destroying the Golden Calf – the ancient idolatry.

Perhaps most striking because they express what is most near and immediate in the lived experience of the community of industrial workers of Millvale is the expressionist portrayal of capitalist wealth and cold indifference during the Great Depression that

stands in contradiction to the solidarity of family and community. In stark contrast with the realistic portrayal of the Croatian family's simple communal meal where Christ is a mystical presence, there is counterpoised the solitary expressionist figure of the greedy capitalist, reading his stock report, waited on by a Negro servant, ignoring the hungry man begging at his feet, and shunned by an angel.

The Transcendent Vision of 1941

Despite the angry, horrific, terrible images of greed, oppression and war, the 1941 murals express a powerful vertical counterpoint with mystical images (recalling the images of William Blake, the great radical English poet and visionary) that show Christ descending into hell and rising into heaven to join the dove of peace, the maternal Holy Spirit. The church is crowned with a mighty vision of unity, peace and purpose, but it is not only "up there" in the heavens, it is underfoot in the flowers and trees defying poison and death, in the mediating figures of St. Francis and St. Clare who represent the human middle ground rising by compassion above evil toward the light, in those places occupied by workers and the poor, within the bonds of the family and ethnic roots, - where the love of nature and the solidarity of community reigns.

Such a transcendent vision can only become reality when we embrace the balance of absolute justice:

Justice

Balance is the key.
 Walk on two legs; be even-handed.
 When the angel of God contemplates
 The affairs and conflicts of mankind,
 She finds the balance-point,
 The truth of all sides.
 Malice toward none, the radical center,
 The flame of wisdom on her forehead,
 With charity for all.

In our own time, where growing global and national inequality fuels fear, xenophobia and anger, where war and terrorism are spreading, where displaced peoples find no refuge, and where Mother Nature herself seems to cry out for relief, the murals of Maxo Vanka in the church of St. Nicholas in Millvale take on each year a more urgent relevance.

Charles McCollester, (4/4/16)