

17th World OIDFA Lace Congress and General Assembly in Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2016

By Jeri Ames in Maine



Background: OIDFA = l'Organisation Internationale de la Dentelle au Fuseau et à l'Aiguille, or International Bobbin and Needle Lace Organisation (European spelling). All business is conducted in French and English, and during Congresses, also in the hosting nation's language. The dominant language is English. For more information, go to www.oidfa.com.

Lace has always reflected the longing for beauty; not only historic representations but also the aesthetic images of today. We reproduce laces of the past and also acknowledge the passage of time with beautiful modern designs. Slovenia, in the foothills of the Alps, has become one of the current leading lace making communities of the world. The nation of 2.1-million is committed to offering lace making to school children as an elective, and most recently 1,300 children in Slovenia were receiving lace instruction. When you see children making lace, or photos of children making lace, they project an aura of confidence in the knowledge that they have a skill that is rare for our time. The quarterly bulletins of OIDFA in the last few years have contained many articles about these children, and also about adults who make lace as a commercial enterprise.

I arrived on Wednesday afternoon via train from Budapest, having traveled with an English speaking member of the Budapest Lace Group. Met at hotel the next morning with a German friend for a day trip to Idrija. The landscape as we drew closer was heavily wooded, and it was apparent it had taken a lot of skillful engineering to build the steep winding roads with sharp switchbacks. Idrija's main square was uncrowded and immaculate. Our first visit was to the castle, up a steep hill, and then up up up inside, with a male guide telling too much about mercury mining, so that we did not have sufficient time to really enjoy the lace exhibit at the top. On the way down, I counted 109 steps.

We then went to the Idrija Lace School on the main square. Founded in 1876, it is the largest and oldest lace school in the world that has been working uninterrupted since its establishment. It was quite lovely, very clean, spacious and well-maintained. We were free to wander, and saw some Summer classes being held for adults. During the past school year, 400 girls and 40 boys from ages 6 through 15 elected to take lace classes here. The laces they made, exhibited with

ages noted, were stunning. There was a shop full of small lace treasures, T-shirts, books. Everywhere, we were given English-language brochures which showed photos of very happy children - making lace. Opt for English at: www.cipkarskasola.si

A Slovenian lunch was served in a local restaurant, followed by more time to shop and visit a couple galleries with lace exhibits. At the tourist bureau, they were selling sheets of lace tattoos, with application instructions in Slovenian and English. What a fun fund raiser that would be for lace guilds in America! In the town square, a brass band of teenagers was boarding a bus to go to Ljubljana for an evening performance.

Thursday night, prior to the 3-day meeting, large tables were set up in the city center for the use of 1,000 lace makers. It was very festive, with perfect weather. The young brass band from Idrija marched into the square playing jaunty music. Being steeped in the history of



their lace making grandmothers and generations before, my loud soprano voice shouted "Bravo" - for their grandmothers - during the polite applause.

In a second, smaller, square, a very long Slovenian-style lace pillow was set up with many sets of prickings, bobbins and lace that had been started. This was from the village of Ziri, where they make lace and shoes. A young boy of about 10 was in perpetual motion, showing several people how to make the laces on it. (Sometimes retro-lacing!) His mother, Andreja, told me the pillow was 2 meters and 40 centimeters long and 106 centimeters in circumference. Two men worked 3 days and nights, leaning over an open staircase, vertically packing sawdust into this pillow in the traditional way. During the following 3 days, it was set up in the sales room at the Congress. This family has a lace business in Ziri, and they speak English: www.cipkemojca.com.

After formal registration Friday morning, at the opening general assembly meeting, we were reminded that OIDFA is the largest and most significant lace event for lace makers of the world. Congresses are held in even-

numbered years, with the upcoming 2018 one to be in Belgium and the 2020 one to be in Estonia.

Some statistics given at the opening: 465 registered visitors from 37 countries. An additional 1,800 visitors had reservations for one or more days in the three days (June 24 to 26) of the meeting portion of the Congress. There were 24 national exhibits, contest exhibits, 42 commercial sales booths, 20 lectures. Prior to the 3-day meeting, 10 regional lace classes were offered. Following the meeting, there was an optional 5-day tour of the country.



I attended all the lectures, which were held in large meeting rooms. Most were delivered by energetic career women with advanced university degrees who have kept lace in their lives since childhood. Translation to English/German/Slovenian was simultaneous. We were given earphones, so we could understand. In the green goody bag was a bound book with printed texts of all the lectures, in English and French. And, a second bound book of 42 Slovenian lace patterns, with ages given of those designed and made by children.

At the gala dinner, we were entertained by folk dancers and a fashion show where the regional costumes were explained. At the opening and closing meetings we were entertained by children playing musical instruments and by dancers. Most unique were six young girls who -



at center stage - wove the narrow 3-pair lace tape of Slovenia. Each carried a large bobbin wound with a heavy yarn. A 7th girl sat at the front left of the stage on a cushion, holding a large round lace pillow to which the yarns for the dancers was attached.

On Monday morning, my traveling companion and I returned to Budapest via the 8-hour train. Enroute, she made lace and I prepared questions for her use in interviewing the Hungarian Nemeshany Lace expert. There is only one go-to person still alive - and a lace museum has requested documentation for this rare lace.

More Information About the Lacemakers of Slovenia:

First, there is Manca Ahlin, the New York City architect. She delivered one of the Congress lectures. After I discovered her last year while doing some lace research, she was introduced to Devon at the Ratti Center of The Metropolitan Museum. Manca makes the most exquisite lace jewelry, and also designs large room dividers using bobbin lace designs and heavy cords or ropes. She was a Slovenian lace protégé as a child, and has found ways to continue using her lace knowledge professionally. One piece in Ziri fills an archway with a lace design, and then shoes are suspended from the top. Here are two addresses to start, which will take you to others:

<http://lace.mantzalin.com/>
<http://www.mrxstitch.com/adventures-time-lace-manca-ahlin/>

If history is what you like, the language is Slovenian, but you'll understand most of the story that takes you from past to present. Runs 30 minutes; please do not give up at the places where there is just talk or the crayon drawings of children. Take up your tatting, and it will soon be back to pictures of interest, some quite modern at the end.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALQOUSg158c>

This one illustrates how you can have a government-funded arts council tell a lace story. Runs 12 minutes:

<https://youtu.be/0NdC4cOJgag>