

Mirko Jurak, 1935-2014. An Obituary.



In 1989, the Sir Robert Menzies Centre in London sent out a circular letter inviting European Australianists to express their interest in the creation of a „European Association for Studies on Australia.“ The response was largely positive, and in March of that year eight Professors of Australian Studies from eight countries met there to create EASA. Mirko Jurak, Professor of English at the University of Ljubljana, was one of them. The University of Klagenfurt was also presented.

Mirko Jurak studied English and German at the University of Ljubljana, where he took his first degree and his Ph.D. He then went on to do post-doc research at the University of Sussex, where his investigations into Modern English literature were supervised by David Daitches. Returning to Ljubljana, he was soon appointed Full Professor. In his long career, he was also Head of the English department, Dean and Deputy Dean of the Philosophical Faculty and Deputy Vice Chancellor of his university. He was the first instructor of his department to teach all of his classes in English and he became a mentor to generations of Slovenian, but also some American and Austrian students.

He also made a name for himself by establishing a number of international links at a time when Yugoslavia was still a communist country. Amongst these were contacts with Australian universities.

Mirko offered me the gift of his friendship at the first Australian studies conferences in Central Europe in September 1982, organized by him (and generously supported by the Australian embassy of Belgrade) in Slovenia's resort of Bled. He overwhelmed us all by his wit and vitality, which sometimes bordered onto the boisterous.. We met again at the first Swiss Australian studies conference two years later, ably organized by Werner Senn and Rudolf Bader in Bern. From then on we met fairly regularly: our two universities are only 80 km apart and we took turns in giving guest lectures to our students. He also attended the biennial GAST conference at Klagenfurt in 2000.

Mirko was, in the truest sense of the word, erudite. Well known amongst European Australianists, he was the long-time editor of *Acta Neophilologica*, a journal for Slovene, English, German (and a few other languages) studies. He retained the editorship even after his retirement at age 70, publishing a fat volume of essays each year. As late as in 2009 he published a 40-page article on Shakespeare in it. Elizabethan literature was one of his special fields and he wrote nine introductions to Shakespearean play for Slovene school textbooks. Another field well ploughed by him was Slovene exile literature in the USA, Australia and other Commonwealth countries. His last publication (in 2013!) was a survey essay on all exile Slovene writers living in Canada.

On the occasion of his retirement, Canberra honoured him with a letter of distinction for his services to Australian literature and culture.

Sadly, Mirko was diagnosed with cancer in 2005, an infliction that he bravely battled but that did not keep him from his research and publications. He had the usual treatment that provided the usual burst of hope. By 2010 he no longer dared to travel. But we sometimes met at a pub close to his apartment in Ljubljana and he never let on about his condition. He passed away around Oct 20th (his relatives did not provide the exact date).

What a man! I miss him terribly much—as do so many of his students and colleagues.

He is survived by a daughter and two granddaughters. The English department of the University of Ljubljana held a solemn and dignified fare-well event.

Adi Wimmer (University of Klagenfurt)