

Original Paper

The Topic of Mining in Secondary School Literature Textbooks from 1850 to 1950

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Abstract

During the first century of secondary school literature textbook publishing (from the introduction of Slovenian language as a school subject after the March Revolution in the Austrian Empire to the first Five-Year Plan after World War II) over a hundred texts featuring the topic of mining and related activities were included. The first writings have a clearly affirmative attitude towards mining, perceived and presented as a way of promoting general prosperity. The first mentions of the negative aspects of mining and the deceptive folly of coveting precious mineral resources appear towards the end of the 19th century. Only during the interwar period, however, were there various texts which presented mining as an inhumane and dangerous activity. After World War II the approach was again optimistic: in central literature textbooks mining was depicted as the glorification of socialist progress. Relevant texts were published in eight series of textbooks, the first as early as in the Bleiweis series for lower secondary schools in 1850 and the last in the ethnic Slovenian Beličič series of textbooks in 1947. The discovery of mercury in the Idrija mine was described by Valvazor, Kastelic, Hrovat and Oblak.

Keywords

natural science, didactics, mineral resources, Idrija mine, mercury

1. Introduction

This article deals with the topic of mining in secondary school literature textbooks over the first century of their publication, based on research carried out on the topic in literature textbooks from the times of Austria–Hungary, the interwar period (in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and later in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Kingdom of Italy, which at that time included the Littoral (Primorska) region), and in literature textbooks published up until 1950 (in FLRJ—Federal People’s Republic of

Yugoslavia—and in cross-border ethnically Slovenian territory under the Allied Military Government). The main research interest focused on the high frequency of this topic in textbooks and, above all, on an analysis of attitudes towards the activity associated on the one hand with the progress of civilization and the growth of material prosperity, and on the other hand (often even today) with backbreaking work in hazardous and risky conditions.

In the first century of publishing, Slovenian secondary school literature textbooks featured over a hundred texts on the topic of mining or other related activities. Prose texts predominate, but poems are common as well. The texts partly belong to the field of educational literature, since particularly because of German language as the language of instruction in lower secondary schools during the second half of the nineteenth century, Slovenian classes included natural sciences, geography and economics subjects, and such a situation continued into the twentieth century mostly in the literature textbooks of civic (Note 1) and vocational secondary schools, often also including experiential and imaginative texts with a literary ambition and value.

The texts revealed three types of attitudes towards mining: the first draws attention to its positive and negative aspects; the second deals only with the positive aspect, i.e., economic development or, according to popular modern wording, growth in domestic product; and the third focuses on the negative aspect, namely the gruelling work that endangers miners and their health and moreover often increases man's alienation. The latter aspect appeared more frequently in interwar literature textbooks, while during the period after World War II a typically pessimistic perspective was balanced by the addition again of some optimistic texts relating to social and economic developments of the period.

Four texts by different authors provide narratives about the mercury mine in Idrija (they appear in all historical periods mentioned at the beginning of this article), while all texts focus on didactically the most attractive discovery of quicksilver and the beginnings of the Idrija mine operation. In contrast to the changed attitude after World War II mentioned above, the first three texts are explicitly affirmative, and only the 1946 text additionally brings the discovery that, besides wealth, mercury brings suffering as well.

2. Method

The article is limited to the period from 1850 to 1950, i.e., from the beginning of publishing secondary school literature textbooks in Slovenian territory, when the second industrial revolution greatly increased the importance of exploiting natural resources, up to the 1950s, when social and international relationships gained priority after World War II. All texts on the topic of mining have been included; however, the focus of the author's research interest is not a quantitative but a qualitative text analysis. The key research goal is to establish whether political, economic and social developments in Slovenian territory were reflected in the content and communicative orientation of particular texts on the topic, regardless of whether they are in poetic or prose form. Special attention is devoted to texts on the discovery of mercury in Idrija in the final part of the article, since the Idrija mine was second only to

the Spanish Almaden among the world's largest mines for extracting a metal that is attractive and valuable, but also detrimental to health.

3. Discussion

3.1 Positive Aspect of Mining in Literature Textbooks up until World War I

Macun's *Flowers of Slovenian Poetry*, the first secondary school literature textbook for upper grammar schools, features among other texts poetry by Valentin Vodnik, who praises the fertility of Slovenian lands, presenting mining as one of the basic activities that enable survival:

Carniolan! your land is healthy,

Its position most suitable for hard-working people,

Field, vineyard,

Mountain, the sea,

Ore, trade,

Sustain you plentifully. (To My Compatriots, Macun 1850: 23, translated from Slovene)

The same attitude to the usefulness of mineral resources, specifically mercury, continues in further literature textbooks, such as Janežič's *Cvetnik*, a literature textbook for lower grammar schools. A passage from Vodnik's presentation of the land of Carniola is quoted there:

The greatest wealth of the land of Carniola are its minerals and linen. In several places, minerals are extracted, transported on rivers and processed. Mercury, iron, steel, and lead are sold abroad and thus earn money. (Krajnska dežela, Janežič II 1867: 4, translated from Slovene)

The Enlightenment sort of optimism, integrated in the didactic frame of divine providence, is included in texts by other authors, such as Matija Vrtovec from the Vipava Valley, known for his manual for winegrowers and as the initiator of Prešeren's poem *The Toast*. His text in Bleiweis's textbook for lower grammar schools describes the Karst and the Vipava Valley, specifically mentioning natural resources of the Littoral hilly area:

In forests, there live pitmen, ironworkers and many iron traders who like very much to exchange iron for grain or wine, the scent of which attracts them strongly. Similarly to the biggest countries in the world, the smallest places exchange their produce and products, and those living around Mount Nanos do the same, so that all, as the children of God, are provided with all they need. Therefore, whatever direction we turn to at the top of Nanos, we see that God's loving kindness takes care of all his beloved and wisely provides for all their needs. (A View from Mount Nanos, Bleiweis I 1850: 20, translated from Slovene)

If nowadays the burning of coal in thermal power stations is known to cause severe air pollution in some heavily industrialized areas and is one of the strongest factors contributing to the overheating of our planet, the attitude to coal mining was completely different a hundred years ago. Brinar's literature textbook for civic schools (created in 1906 when the first civic school with Slovene as the language of instruction opened in Postojna) featured the following text by Henrik Schreiner, a scholar and author of

primary school literature textbooks and language tutorial books:

Without coal, large-scale trade could not develop today, and as trade activities are the main foundation of all material development of any nation, we can say that “coal is the first foundation of today’s material progress”. It is material development that the prosperity or suffering of an individual and the whole country depend on. Therefore, as regards the authority of Great Britain in international trade, those who maintain that “coal is the source of a country’s power” are absolutely right. (Coal, Brinar II 1911: 193, translated from Slovene)

3.2 Problematizing the Value of Material Wealth in Sket’s Literature Textbooks

Jakob Sket’s literature textbooks for lower and higher secondary schools, published from 1886 to World War I in Klagenfurt (Celovec), connect teaching about mineral resources and mining with patriotism, since the foreword to the third volume for the lower school highlights that “geographical and mineralogical texts should draw students’ attention to the beauty and wealth of the homeland and Austria in particular, thus nurturing and igniting the sense of love for our immediate and extended homeland” (Sket III 1892).

Regardless of this praise, Sket’s textbooks also feature texts problematizing the craving for a leisurely life and greediness for wealth or material possessions. In a text of the prematurely deceased author Josip Samotorčan—Gradačan, a farmer who dislikes work but wants to get rich quickly hires workers to find minerals in his estate. When they come across crystals of a glittering mineral, the farmer brings a miner to establish the value of the discovery:

Joyously, the farmer receives him and shows him the stone, which he has mistaken for golden ore. The miner looks at the crystal, scratches one of them, inspects the mine and then fixes his eyes on the farmer, saying: Why do you dig for gold under the earth; you have plenty of gold and silver lying on top of it. You have lush meadows and fertile fields. You rear many head of cattle and take care that they get fat. You bring manure and spread it on the fields, so that they give you a rich yield of grain! You can transform your stock and grain into gold and silver at the fair...” (Golden Ore, Sket III 1892: 88, translated from Slovene)

Even stronger is a very similar message in an instructive short story written by scholar and writer Fran Erjavec, bearing a famous title, relevant even today: *All that Glitters Is Not Gold*. In the story a farmer, Blaž Čerin from Kolk in the Gorizia region, finds yellow crystals while digging holes for a fence at his pasture. Convinced that he has found gold, without revealing it to anybody, he goes on foot to goldsmiths in the towns of Cividale, Udine, and Gorizia. After many disappointments he is directed to a secondary school professor of natural sciences who explains that these are worthless crystals of iron pyrite, or fool’s gold. Čerin leaves them for use at school, saying:

“Then I ask you, take them all for school! Not a farthing I want for it. But please teach them well, these young men of ours, so that everybody knows this treacherous mineral and nobody gets caught in a trap. What I have suffered these four days I wouldn’t wish on anyone, not even my worst enemy”. (Sket III 1892: 156, translated from Slovene)

3.3 Mining as Alienation, Suffering and Tragedy

Janežič's lower school level literature textbooks featured for the first time a prose text by Slovenian writer Josip Jurčič, which is today completely unknown, with the topic of comparing sailors' and miners' lives. A sailor's life is varied, full of changes and experiences, enlivened by encounters with unknown lands and people, while a miner is trapped in an underground world, emotionally numb and alienated:

Boring and silent is a miner's life. Like a mole he burrows and sticks to the underground, day by day he brandishes his pickaxe in the black hollow underground shaft; by flickering candlelight he digs and breaks the ore from the ground. Just as it is completely lonely, dark and barren deep down where he is, so his spirit numbs and goes dark. Only rarely does he climb out to the merciful sun, namely for a holiday, and then he watches how foolishly and in such a hustle and bustle the world above lives. For a short moment he is overwhelmed with a wish to stay in the world. But his habit has made him like the underground world; so he is soon seen again with his hammer and pickaxe as he pecks and strikes for so long that another hand with another hammer drives the last nail in his burial coffin. (A Sailor and a Miner, Janežič I 1865: 40, translated from Slovene)

If Jurčič's pessimistic approach to the topic of mining in the second half of the 19th century was an exception, it became a rule during the interwar period, probably as a consequence of social changes following the Russian October Revolution, when it was desirable for the literature textbooks to point out unjust social conditions or the exploitation of lower social strata, more or less deprived of their rights. Such prose and poetic texts were often published in textbooks for lower and higher secondary schools as well as civic schools.

Jurčič's description of miners' work is very similar to the text written by the scholar, author and translator Anton Funtek, which first appeared in Brinar's literature textbook for civic schools at the beginning of the 20th century and again in Budal's *Slovenian Selection for Secondary Schools*, published in Gorizia after all Slovenian schools had been abolished under fascist rule, and was meant to teach literary Slovenian language as a foreign language to Slovenian students:

Deep under the ground a miner digs; the pit is narrow, the air stifling. The lamp flickers, the strong man breathes with difficulty. His tools break off mighty lumps, the ground trembles when they fall to his feet. The thuds sound hollowly in the pit and echo to the land above where the day is so great, the air so fresh and invigorating. Those up there do not understand how hard it is to live day by day under the earth, to work in unfathomable solitude and quiet. Without company, a song dies when a miner steps into the shaft, he has nobody to talk to and hardly would he want to. But thought after thought appears; they do not seem to be joyful. Nor does it seem that finally the senses get used to this dim light and unbearable silence; never, the human body is not created for such work. (A Miner, Budal 1928: 158, translated from Slovene)

Even today, the best known text of this type is Župančič's poem *Duma*, first published in Grafenauer's

literature textbook for upper secondary schools. In the last part of the poem (introduced with the line *I walked your land and drank its griefs*), the poet emphasizes the suffering of miners, connecting the topic of exploitation with the emigration of Slovenians. What hurts him most is the vanishing sense of belonging to their homeland:

*Land, thou art holy, and blessed be to whom you bring fruit;—
But I know these plains, gleaming in the sunlight—to whom do they belong?
You left your hoe and your plough, dug yourself into the earth,
Old man, the cross on your tomb rusts and leans down;
Your son has buried himself alive under the earth—he digs in America,
In the pit, the dawn of the plains still shines upon his dark thoughts,
His son will know them no more nor dream about them.* (Grafenauer IV 1930: 202, translated from Slovene)

Bajec's famous literature textbooks for lower secondary schools, very high quality and didactically advanced, published from 1931 to 1945, featured prose and poetic texts on mining topics. The poem *Trbovlje* of Anton Boštele, a priest, already positions the topic with its title alone, emphasizing the contrast between men's longing and working for a living:

*Hey, where to, men?—
Like shadows they go.
A fire subdued
Burns in their eyes,
It gives no warmth,
It only hurts.
With lamps in their hands
And with bent backs
One after another they go,
Into the black earth
To earn their bread,
To earn their bread.* (Bajec II 1932: 167, translated from Slovene)

Mirko Javornik, a reporter, author and translator who emigrated for political reasons to the USA after World War II, published a story in 1933 titled *The Black Slope*, with explicitly social content. Only two years after its publication, a longer excerpt from the story, entitled *Buried in a Mine*, appeared in Bajec's literature textbook (entitled *An Accident in a Mine* in the civic school textbook) and very vividly warns of intolerable conditions for the miners who risk their lives in poorly maintained pits. Brothers Jože and Tone prepare an explosion and rush to the shelter, but the mine wagon gets stuck and Tone ends up lying in a collapsed tunnel. Using an iron tube, he tries to get in contact with other miners:

The clank was heard again, now three times in a row. Suddenly hope rose in him. To live! To live!

He started howling. He lifted his head as much as he could and summoned all his strength. When he got tired, he listened attentively. They cannot be far. They probably have heard him and are coming. It would be nice if they saved him and carried him out. For a man cannot die as an animal without seeing the sun once again. He cannot ... (Bajec III 1935: 67/68, translated from Slovene)

Gaspari's literature textbook for civic schools, which just before the onset of World War II replaced Brinar's textbook, which had been in use for several decades, features a prose text entitled *A Miner* written by scholar and author Rudolf Pečjak. An expressive description at the end of the text stresses the opposition between the mining and the living settings, between hard unhealthy work in pits and the idyllic miners' settlement; however, the final message of mining as a well-paid activity conveys a positive aspect:

Far yonder, yonder in low stifling galleries, supported with beams, some lamps are flickering, hollow thuds of pickaxes resound, the whirring of machine drills pierces the air, coal breaks to pieces. Surrounded with thick stifling coal dust, miners dig into the black wall. Standing, kneeling, with bent backs, bowed, they drill, hit, dig, through tears caused by the dust.

Up there, far away, far away, there is a soft summer night, full of stars. The earth spreads intoxicating smells of the growing grass, flowers, ripening grain and fruit. Miners' little houses are there.

The first mine wagons loaded with coal already roll squeaking out of low dark galleries. Grim, blackened faces behind the wagons. However, happy news is coming with them today:

"It digs well".

Piecework.

Earnings.

Family.

Thank goodness there's work. (Gaspari III 1939: 96, translated from Slovene)

3.4 A Shift in Evaluating Mining Activity after World War II

The period following World War II still brings texts depicting mining as a strenuous and dangerous activity. Beličič's literature textbook for upper secondary schools, published in Trieste in the A zone under the Allied Military Government, featured for example Aškerc's *A Worker's Song About Coal*, written in free verse. The second stanza goes as follows:

At the bottom. Corridors go to all sides

like tunnels of a mole. And workers,

black like moles we part.

A darker and a narrower path, more and more.

It is sultry here and you breathe with difficulty.

Heat increases... Are we getting closer to the hell?

Yes, here is hell for some;

They do hard penance for the sin

of wanting to live and to eat ... (Beličič II 1947: 299/300, translated from Slovene)

Literature textbook for higher secondary schools by Borštnik and others includes a sonnet written by Božo Vodusek from the collection of poems *The Disenchanted World*. It was typical at the time of its publication for the emphasis to be not on the cruelty of the work in a mine, but on the cruelty of the employer:

*Under his pickaxe the ceiling collapsed,
 Could be a modest grave for this clumsy man,
 God knows why they found him in the pit
 With head and arms sticking out of a heap.
 Slowly they released him, dug him out,
 Only his boots remained wedged inside
 Some other would sing like a blackbird mocking the death,
 But a miner cannot go barefoot in the pit.
 Downcast, he went to the supervisor and begged:
 A pair of boots, as I was left unshod,
 No need for remedies and bandages at all.
 I know that he was smitten, but to wear new boots
 At the expense of others! Oh, why were you not buried,
 Then you might not be asking for your funeral!*

(A Buried Miner, Borštnik VII 1949: 151, translated from Slovene)

An interesting transition as compared to the first half of the 20th century and a return to an Enlightenment-type of optimism occur in the texts that emphasize mainly positive aspects of exploiting natural resources, both in textbooks belonging to the first Five-Year Plan in postwar Yugoslavia, and in contemporary textbooks published in the ethnically Slovenian territory under the ideological control of the Anglo-American military government. Yugoslav textbooks emphasized the need to industrialize a backward economy, while those published in the ethnically Slovenian territory reflected American economic liberalism.

The textbook by Borštnik and colleagues for lower secondary schools thus brings a prose text entitled *Builders of a New World*, by Juš Kozak. The author, a prewar Slovenian writer, describes youth work brigades building a new railway in an undeveloped part of Yugoslavia. When he enthusiastically reflects upon a transformation of values and a happy future in socialism, he writes:

*Not even six years have passed and now the young build a railway, not a toy, but a very real railway to transport ore, people, goods and connect remote places with the world.
 Six years passed from a toy to a railway built by the young, a short period in the flow of time, but enough time for a massive shift that turned the world upside down. The old world. (Borštnik II 1947: 247, translated from Slovene)*

An unsigned text in the same textbook, *Miners Compete*, describes a competition among the miners in the Trbovlje coal mine to be the first to exceed the daily work quota. In spite of the heat in excess of forty degrees centigrade they do not see their work as heavy nor do they fear injuries at work:

Romih is forty-two and at the May Day competition he obtained the title of a shock worker. Some months ago, while carrying a rail, he was hit by a wagon that got loose at the upper extraction site. His collar bone and jaw were broken. It was generally thought there would not be much of him any more in future.

“But I will not give in so easily! Earlier than I thought I was healthy and back in the mine. During summer, they sent me for a vacation to Gozd-Martuljek, because I am a shock worker. They are good, such vacations. After you have taken a rest, you work more easily again”. /.../

In this competition, the mine of Trbovlje exceeded the work task by 98 percent. (Borštnik II 1947: 242, translated from Slovene)

In a contemporary Slovenian textbook by Vilko Čekuta (editor, architect and director of a youth theatre) published in Trieste for lower secondary schools, two unsigned texts can be read, probably translations of American texts. The text entitled *This and That* presents the development of world trade and, although it describes developments of previous centuries, the beginnings of today’s globalization can be found there:

During that time, world trade broke tight bonds that limited it to the Mediterranean Sea. Trade moved from Italian cities to the coast of the Atlantic Ocean.

In the ever-developing world trade, this huge transition was not left without good consequences. Due to the efforts of rulers, gradually the special rights that obstructed trade disappeared and their place was taken by regulations which brought it to a much higher level. (Čekuta 1947: 284, translated from Slovene)

The other text is entitled *The Earth’s Treasures Are a Source of Civilization, Culture and Prosperity*. Although it notes the risks of miners’ work underground, the basic approach to extracting minerals is explicitly affirmative:

Man obtains many treasures from the underground. With all their physical and mental powers, men toil day and night to obtain these treasures and use them to make the heavy days of their lives easier and sweeter. /.../ Only the combined powers of both form the force that can do anything for man to get possession of treasures which the earth holds partly on its surface and partly in its depths. And a miner who, when entering the underground world, never knows whether he will return to the merciful sky, goes there to collect them. (Čekuta 1947: 280, translated from Slovene)

3.5 Texts about the Mercury Mine in Idrija

In the first century of publishing Slovenian secondary school literature textbooks, four different texts about the beginnings of the Idrija mine appeared. Their authors were Miha Kastelic, librarian, poet and editor of *The Carniolan Bee*, with his text *The Finding of Mercury in Idrija* (published in Bleiweis’s

literature textbook for lower grammar schools from 1850); Florentin Horvat, a priest, scholar, youth author and translator with the text *The Beginnings of the Idrija Mine* (in Sket's textbooks for lower secondary schools, published in 1892, 1906 and 1912); Josip Ciril Oblak, lawyer, travel writer, mountaineer, theatre and literary critic with the text *On the Beginnings of the Idrija Mine* (in Wester's literature textbook for lower secondary schools in 1922, in Kacin's *Literature Textbook for the Young* in 1930 and in Beličič's literature textbook for higher secondary schools in 1947); and Johann Weikhard von Valvasor (a text entitled *Idrija Mine* in the literature textbook by Borštnik and colleagues for higher secondary schools).

Kastelic had two generally known written sources at his disposal, namely an exhaustive description in Valvasor's *Glory of the Duchy of Carniola* from 1689 and the second part of a monograph written in German by the Idrija mine doctor, Balthasar Hacquet, *Oryctographia carniolica* of 1781. Kastelic took over Čop's position in the then lyceum library, which also included this scientific work by Hacquet, according to the stamp on the title page visible online at a DLIB site. Since Hacquet referred primarily to Valvasor regarding the beginnings of the Idrija mine (op. cit.: 37-44), Kastelic could not rely on much help from his work. The text of Kastelic derived from Valvasor and is actually a developed prosification of the first eleven stanzas of the poem *Idrija Mine Rhyme from 1479*, which in fact consists of forty-four stanzas (Valvasor I 1689: 397-401). The bucket-maker's surprise when he inadvertently found mercury is described by Kastelic in a more vivid way than by the other two authors:

In the morning at the break of dawn the man runs to the stream and wants quickly to remove the bucket—but he cannot! He grabs it again; pulls it away, pulls it away!—by no means can he move it; even less lift it. He starts wondering and thinking to and fro, what monster could hold it so fast. When he looks into the bucket, he sees that something is glittering in the water. He removes the water and is even more surprised to see that some silvery-white matter (mercury) remains at the bottom. It must be, he says to himself, that this stuff is so heavy that the bucket could not be moved. /.../ Kacjan Andertajn then made the first step to the operation of the world-famous Idrija ore mine in Europe. (Bleiweis I 1850: 141, translated from Slovene)

The contents of the texts that present the story of the bucket-maker as the discoverer, Kacjan Anderlein with his colleagues who started extracting mercury ore, and surveyor Kutler, under whose leadership a rich ore vein was found on the day of St. Acacius, were reproduced by Horvat and Oblak from the writings of Peter Hitzinger, a priest, writer, publicist and historian, in his German-language book *Das Quecksilber-Bergwerk Idria*, published in Ljubljana in 1860 (op. cit.: 10-12).

It was the *Valvasor Reader*, Mirko Rupel's translation of selected excerpts from the *Glory of the Duchy of Carniola*, that after 1936 enabled the publishing of a text in the literature textbook by Borštnik and colleagues that correctly renders Valvasor's writing about the significance, beginnings and the size of Idrija mine. For the first time, this textbook emphasizes the author's finding that mercury brings not only wealth and material prosperity but also disease and social degradation to miners:

In some places, mercury flows like spring water, but those who find it usually suffer from it, sacrificing their health, as poisonous mercury vapours invade the man and permeate him to the extent that his head, arms, legs and the whole body shake when he comes back to the open air; afterwards he is powerless and unfit for any work until the final resting place of his scourge, namely death. From then on, he has to beg and be fed by charity. (Borštnik IV 1946: 288, translated from Slovene).

4. Conclusion

It can be concluded that a hundred years of publishing texts on mining in Slovenian secondary school literature textbooks testify that the topic is important; however, this activity is presented, depending on the development of social relationships or the man-nature relationship, on the one hand as the source of man's prosperity, and on the other hand as the source of his suffering and misfortune. This duality is nicely illustrated with a folk song published in a new literature textbook for civic schools just after the onset of World War II:

Think over, o man on the earth,

About the miner's suffering:

When he digs for gold under the earth,

For lead, for ore and mercury! (A Folk Song, Gaspari III 1939: 98, translated from Slovene)

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Note

Note 1. In Slovenian: meščanska šola, a secondary school modelled after the German Bürgerschule (trans.).