



He Was Already There

A Pilgrimage to Shevchenko Monuments Around the World

First Edition

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sasha@drokacademy.ca. The author takes no income from this book. Proceeds after production costs support students. The author supports student caregivers and those who stand with Ukraine.

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Readers who buy this book receive every revised First Edition free: write to sasha@drokacademy.ca.

The first edition remains the author's edition and will keep being updated. Second editions are written with co-authors who have lived experience; where they see a matter differently, each view is shown with its sources.

AI tools supported the research and drafting of this book. That support was substantial and I am grateful for it. I read and proofread the book myself, and every idea and every decision in it remains my responsibility.

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Day One

He Was Already There: Kranj, Slovenia

Shevchenko Day, March 9

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Photo 1. *Kranj.*

Today is March 9. Shevchenko Day. The birthday of Taras Hryhorovych Shevchenko, born in 1814 in the village of Moryntsi, Kyiv region, into serfdom, into an empire that did not believe he had the right to a language, and who became, against every odds, the voice that gave that language back to an entire people.

To mark this day, I am beginning something I have wanted to do for a long time: sharing a series of personal encounters with Shevchenko monuments I have visited across the world. Not as a historian or a curator. Simply as a Ukrainian-Canadian who has been moving through this world for over twenty years and who has found, again and again, that Shevchenko finds you, in parks, in plazas, in cities you did not expect, in moments you were not quite prepared for.

This week, one story per day. Each a different place. Each the same poet, looking back. We begin in Kranj, Slovenia.

The Detour Before Ljubljana

The train from Ljubljana to Kranj takes 40 minutes, a short journey through the Julian Alps foothills, past green valleys and the kind of clean, unhurried Slovenian countryside that makes you feel the world still has quiet places left in it. I had arrived in Ljubljana a few hours early for the conference dinner, and I knew exactly where I was going.

Kranj is Slovenia's fourth-largest city, but it wears its size lightly. The old town sits on a rocky promontory above the confluence of the Sava and Kokra rivers, medieval towers rising over rushing glacial water. There are narrow cobblestone streets, Baroque facades, and, everywhere, the presence of France Prešeren.

Prešeren is to Slovenia what Shevchenko is to Ukraine, the national poet, the man whose verses gave a small, overlooked people their dignity and their soul. His face is on the Slovenian two-euro coin. His poem Zdravljica became the national anthem. He wrote in a language the Habsburg Empire considered provincial. He wrote anyway. Sound familiar?

I had read about the monument online, unveiled on November 8, 2021, the eve of the Day of Ukrainian Language and Writing, and the image of it had stayed with me: Shevchenko, in bronze, standing not alone but among contemporaries. Not isolated. Not on a pedestal in the middle of a square, distant and ceremonial. But on an alley, at eye level, among peers.

I needed to see that.

La Ciotat Park and the Alley of Contemporaries

La Ciotat Park is not a grand place. It is a city park in the middle of Kranj: walkways, trees, benches, families with dogs and strollers. The kind of place where ordinary life continues indifferently around whatever monuments it contains.

But what the city has created here is quietly extraordinary. The Alley of Prešeren's Contemporaries is a walking path lined with busts of poets and writers who lived

alongside Prešeren in the first half of the nineteenth century, each one a cultural titan to their own people, each one a name that carries an entire nation's memory. Taras Shevchenko for Ukraine, since 2021. Adam Mickiewicz for Poland, since 2024.

The bust was created by People's Artist of Ukraine, sculptor Seifaddin Ali-ogli Gurbanov. It is a dignified work, the face strong and composed, the gaze forward and steady, the kind of sculptural presence that does not demand attention but holds it when you stop.

I stood in front of it for a long time. Around me, the park continued its ordinary life. Slovenian children ran past with their parents. A couple sat on a bench nearby, absorbed in conversation. A dog pulled on its leash. Nobody particularly noticed the Ukrainian-Canadian standing with the flag still in the middle of the path, staring at a bronze face.

But I noticed everything.

Two Poets, Two Nations, One Alley

At the unveiling ceremony in November 2021, the mayor of Kranj, Matjaž Rakovec, said something I keep returning to: "The significance of Prešeren for Slovenians is similar to the significance of Shevchenko for Ukrainians. The content of Shevchenko's verse is very close in spirit to the poetry of France Prešeren."

I have been thinking about that parallel for years, long before I visited Kranj. Both men lived under empires that denied them. Both wrote in languages their rulers considered secondary, dangerous, inconvenient. Both understood that poetry was not decoration, it was resistance, identity, survival. Prešeren died in 1849 at forty-eight years old. Shevchenko died in 1861 at forty-seven. Neither man lived to see what their words became.

Ambassador Brodovych, speaking at the ceremony in Slovenian, a gesture I find deeply moving, said that Shevchenko is "the figure who unites Ukrainians both in Ukraine and

beyond its borders" and that generations of Ukrainians have called him, quite rightly, the father of the Ukrainian nation.

Standing on that alley, I thought about how much it means, and how rare it is, when another nation says: your poet belongs here, among our poets. Your memory belongs on our street. Not as a guest, not as a curiosity, but as a contemporary. An equal.

Kranj did that. And I am grateful.

The Poetry I Recited

There is a thing I do at Shevchenko monuments. I recite something. Not loudly, not for anyone. It is a private habit, part ritual, part prayer, part the simple need to hear Ukrainian in the air of a foreign place.

In Kranj, standing beside the Kokra River in a Slovenian city park, I recited the poem that comes to me most naturally when I am far from Ukraine, the one that is not about distance but about belonging:

«Заповіт»

Як умру, то поховайте

Мене на могилі

Серед степу широкого

На Вкраїні милій,

Щоб лани широкополі,

І Дніпро, і кручі

Було видно, було чути,

Як реве ревучий.

І в сім'ї вольній, новій

Не забудьте пом'янути

Незлим тихим словом.

The words hung in the park air for a moment. Then a bird called from somewhere in the trees, and ordinary life resumed.

I also thought of another poem, *Думи мої* (Dumy moi, "My Thoughts"), one more intimate, more restless, that felt right for a Ukrainian-Canadian standing on foreign soil, far from the steppe and prairies, trying to make sense of what it means to carry a language with you everywhere you go:

«Думи мої, думи мої»

Думи мої, думи мої,

Лихо мені з вами!

Нащо стали на папері

Сумними рядами?

Чом вас вітер не розвіяв

В степу, як пилину?

Чом вас люди не забули,

Як свою дитину?

There is something Shevchenko understood that Prešeren also understood, that the poem outlasts the poet, outlasts the empire, outlasts the silence imposed on a people. The bust in Kranj's park is proof of that. A Ukrainian poet, standing in Slovenia, among the peers of his century, permanent.

Before the Conference

I took my photographs. I touched the cold bronze, the way you touch a gravestone, or a door to a house you grew up in. I said, quietly, *Слава Україні* (Slava Ukraini, "Glory to

Ukraine"). Then I walked back through Kranj's old town, past the Prešeren house, down to the river, and made my way to the train station.

The conference in Ljubljana was excellent. Good papers, good conversations, and incredible hospitality to celebrate 70 years of the social work profession with incredible social workers under the leadership of Darja Zaviršek. In addition to the conference, I remember that trip to Kranj, in November, before it all began.

Shevchenko was already there. He is always already there, in these places, waiting in parks, on university grounds, at the edges of foreign cities, for Ukrainians and members of the Ukrainian Diaspora to arrive, find him, and remember who they are.

That is the gift of the monument. Not the bronze, not the ceremony, not the speeches: though all of those matter. The gift is the waiting. The permanence of it. The knowledge that no matter how far you travel, somewhere in the world, he is standing on a street and you can go to him.

More this week. Each day, a different city. The same poet, looking back.

Слава Україні.

About this monument



Photo 2. Kranj.

The bust of Taras Shevchenko was unveiled on November 8, 2021, in La Ciotat Park, Kranj, Slovenia, on the eve of the Day of Ukrainian Language and Writing. It was created by People's Artist of Ukraine, sculptor Seifaddin Ali-ogli Gurbanov, and placed on the Alley of Prešeren's Contemporaries. The ceremony was attended by the Mayor of Kranj Matjaž Rakovec, Ambassador of Ukraine to Slovenia Mykhailo Brodovych, and Honorary Consul of Ukraine in Slovenia Sandi Brezovnik. Ambassador Brodovych presented the Mayor with a copy of Shevchenko's *Kobzar* ("The Minstrel", his book of poems) in Slovenian translation.

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