

Milko Jeglic

Slovenian born **Milko Jeglic** (June 2, 1901 – December 18, 1997) was neither a famous mathematician nor a renowned scientist. He created no new branches of mathematics. He founded no new theories of nature. No theorem is named for him. He was a mathematics teacher, a very good mathematics teacher. He was a good husband, father, and friend. Jeglic was born in the small town of Rakek, Slovenia, then part of the Austrian-Hungary Empire. After WWI it belonged to the kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. About the time Milko and his family were forced to flee their country in 1945, it was part of a communist state, the Federal Peoples' Republic of Yugoslavia. Before he died, Slovenia had become an independent state, something he had dreamed of for so long.



Jeglic completed his secondary education at the Slovenian capital Ljubljana before being sent to Zagreb and Innsbruck in Austria where he studied mathematics and pedagogy. He earned a Diploma in Philosophy, Professor's Diploma from the University of Zagreb. Jeglic taught mathematics at secondary schools, and mathematics and pedagogy at the teacher's college in Ljubljana. In 1930 he wed Cirila Kleindienst. Their marriage lasted 64 years until her death in 1994. They had two children, John and Frank. In 1936, Milko was appointed the "superintendent of primary schools" in Slovenia. During this period he published seven mathematics textbooks.

On Palm Sunday in 1941 Axis bombs fell on Ljubljana. By Easter the Italian fascists occupied the city and the southern half of Slovenia while the Nazis occupied the northern half. When Italy capitulated in 1943, the Nazis seized the rest of Slovenia. By April 1945 the Allies occupied all of northern Italy and Austria. The people dreamed of an independent democratic Slovenia. But it was not to be as the Yalta agreement ceded Yugoslavia to Tito's communists. Outspoken anti-communists, the Jeglics gathered up only what they could carry, and joined some panicked 30,000 Slovenes to hike over the mountains to Austria. The exodus took only six days, but it would be just short of five years before the Jeglic family was able to settle into a new home.

They lived in three different camps in Austria, all under British administration. In June the British returned some 12,000 men to Yugoslavia, telling them that they were being transferred to Italy where conditions were better. Instead they were packed and sealed in railroad cattle cars and handed over to Tito's communists. Their mass graves were discovered after the fall of the communists in 1990. The Jeglics and several thousand others were sent to Lienz in the Tyrol, where Milko and others set up schools. Both the British and Austrian authorities examined the students and their faculty and accredited the barracks school. The secondary school curriculum included five languages, history, geography, biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics, including differential and integral calculus. According to Milko's records the school expenses were the equivalent of 27 cents per student per month.

Despite having no relatives there, the Jeglics decided they wanted to go to the United States. On December 8, 1949 they boarded a train with two wooden trunks and cardboard suitcases to begin their long journey to America. Three weeks later they embarked on a liberty ship with some 1500 others. The ship arrived in New York on January 12, 1950. The next day the Jeglics cleared Customs and transferred to a train. There were three cars of refugees on the trip to Chicago, but only a few families were left on the way to Duluth and only the Jeglics for their destination of Mesabi, Minnesota. Milko later recalled his thoughts as he looked out the windows of the train as it sped through the snow-covered countryside of northern Wisconsin and Minnesota. He had no job, didn't know English, had only \$4 and they couldn't go back.

Their sponsor, a Slovenian immigrant named Mike Potocnik, met the Jeglics at the station in Mesabi. The temperature the day they arrived was 42 degrees below zero; the winter was the coldest in local memory. Their sponsor set them up in a small, furnished apartment. To pay for it Cirila worked as a maid and John got a job at Potocnik's grocery store. The family had no boots, hats or overcoats, but over the next few days, paper bags appeared on their doorsteps in the mornings. They contained lined boots, hats, earmuffs, etc. and unsigned notes that said "To keep you warm!" There was no work for Milko other than digging graves until in the spring when he found a job as a driller's helper on the second shift in the open pit iron mines. He was 49 years old and not used to physical labor. He came home at midnight totally exhausted, only able to climb the stairs on all fours. John also took a job in the mine, Cirila found work at the Arrow shirt factory, and John got a paper route. The family was able to repay Potocnik for their expenses. To Milko a debt was an enormous emotional burden and other than a house mortgage, he never had one again.

Before the onset of another northern Minnesota bitter winter the Jeglics contacted friends living in Illinois. As a result the

family moved to Waukegan, where all found menial jobs at Lake Forest College. Then a wonderful thing happened. As Milko was performing his duties as janitor cleaning the rooms of the students, he came across an open calculus book lying on a desk. Seeing the familiar symbols brought tears to his eyes. About this time a student entered the room, saw the teary janitor and learned his background. Soon Milko was tutoring students in mathematics, while they performed his janitorial duties. He wasn't a teacher again quite yet, but the time was nigh. In the spring of 1951 Jeglic learned of an opening for a mathematics professor at St. Mary's College at Notre Dame, Indiana. He traveled to St. Mary's and met its president. When she asked him what salary he required, Milko replied that he would be happy to accept the salary he was getting as a janitor just to be able to teach again. He received a contract for \$3000. He was still at St. Mary's 28 years later when at the age of 78 he returned an unsigned contract.

One of Jeglic's former students recalled that he promised to teach them mathematics if they would teach him English. He said, "Some people learn by seeing, some people learn by hearing, some people learn by feeling, but in this class we will do all three." Milko most enjoyed teaching a number theory course, held in a large arena lecture hall. By the second or third class he not only knew all the names of his 120 students, whom he referred to as his classmates, but he gently corrected the pronunciation of their family names. He told them that no matter how they Americanized their names, back in the countries where their people came from they were pronounced in a different, and, to his mind, a better way.

In 1962, Jeglic, now chairman of the mathematics department, offered me a position at St. Mary's. One day three years later he invited me into his office where he formally reviewed our association. He then asked if he might call me by my first name, to which I enthusiastically agreed. He said, "And you must call me Milko." All I could say was, "I am honored Milko, honored." Those who are quick to call everyone by their first name, can hardly understand the pride I felt that day, and continue to do so more than 40 years later.

Quotation of the Day: "When we left for America, my Dad was 48 years old, my Mom still a beautiful and vibrant woman of 39. They had worked hard and have accomplished much. Together, they only had 6 dollars in their pockets, but they had the courage, the will and the opportunity to build a new future for their sons in a world unknown to them. And they had a decade of true lessons that assured success in whatever was yet to come." – Frank Jeglic