Frank Gorshin
Famous Slovenian American impressionist, actor, comedian and singer and the unforgettable Riddler in the Batman Television Series
By Edward Gobetz

While the Slovenian roots of movie star Audrey Totter were unknown to her compatriots until her famous scientific relative, Dr. John Totter, from Giblje in Belo Kraljevce disclosed them to us, many Slovenian Americans have long proudly claimed Frank Gorshin as one of their own. Papers such as Ameriška Domovina, Prosveta, Ameriški Slovenec, Nova Doba, Glas Naroda, Zanja and Slovenska Dzrnê, loved to publish news about Frank Gorshin, the guy from Pennsylvania whom you could watch on TV and in the movies. Indeed, as the Riddler in the Batman television series he has become one of the most widely known American actors.

Frank was born on April 5, 1934, in Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania. His father, Frank Sr., was a second-generation Slovenian American whose parents immigrated to America from Dolenjska, Slovenia. Frank Sr. worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad as a sign painter and machinist. His wife, Frances or Fanny, nee Prešeren, came as a young girl from Reger, near Novo Mesto, the main city of Dolenjska, or Lower Carniola, in Slovenia. She was a seamstress and a housewife, both of which were respected positions in the community. Frances and Frank Sr. had the three children: Frank Jr., the subject of this article; Herman, who was killed by a car at 15, and Dorothy who studied piano, married and had three children.

Both of Frank’s parents were active in Pittsburgh’s thriving Slovenian community. They sang in the Slovenian Singing Society Prešeren, named after the great Slovenian poet Dr. France Prešeren (1808-1849). They were also acting in various Slovenian plays. When I interviewed Frances more than 35 years ago, she proudly told me that she was a distant relative of the poet Prešeren: her grandfather and her poet’s grandfather, she believed, were cousins. She also said that her son, Frank, being the product of a Slovenian home, spoke mostly Slovenian before going to school. (Unfortunately, disregarding irrefutable facts, Ratko Martinović, writing in 2012, somehow persuaded Wikipedia to identify Gorshin as Croatian, a claim that no objective informed Croatians, and, of course, no informed Slovenians, could support, yet Wikipedia accepted this misleading claim, although its remaining information is quite valuable).

Frank’s early environment provided considerable cultural stimulation, especially in areas of singing, music and dramatics, the favorite recreational activities of his parents and of his widely known aunt, the sister of Frank Sr., Mrs. Mary Skerlong, a noted Slovenian community leader and fraternalist, who taught Slovenian school and was for several decades an announcer on the Slovenian radio program in Pittsburgh; she also generously helped us with our research, especially in Pennsylvania and, of course, on her nephew Frank Gorshin Jr.

Young Frank, or Frankie, loved to paint and originally thought he would become an artist. But, after completing his grade school at Lawrenceville and the Peabody High School in Pittsburgh, he enrolled at the Carnegie Tech School of Drama. His interest in acting, first more or less unknowingly aroused by his parents when he was about twelve years old, was further stimulated during his high school years. This is how he put it:

“I started doing impressions in high school. I was able to entertain people and enjoyed doing it. The first was Al Jolson, when I was 15. I went to movies with a friend to see The Al Jolson Story and I was fascinated by the man, what he did for people. I got off the streetcar, near home, singing like Jolson. I just did it.”

Then he got a job on weekends as an usher at a nearby movie house and refined his talents as an impersonator. “I would see someone on the screen that I liked and it would just happen.”

At 17, Frank had for the first time an opportunity to participate in a citywide talent contest and won. His prize was a one-week engagement at Jacki Heller’s Carousel, with Alan King as headliner. This was to be Frank’s first time an opportunity to participate in a citywide talent contest and won. His prize was a one-week engagement at Jacki Heller’s Carousel, with Alan King as headliner. This was to be Frank’s professional career began. Upon Frank’s return to civilian life, Bergman introduced him — and his professional career began. Upon Frank’s return to civilian life, Bergman introduced him to a Hollywood agent who got him a role in the Paramount motion picture, The Proud and the Profane. Various roles in movies and in television dramas followed. In 1957, according to Shefrin, while visiting his parents in Pittsburgh, Frank was phoned by his agent to rush back to California to screen test for the Clark Gable film, Run Silent, Run Deep. Eager not to miss such an attractive opportunity, Gorshin drove for 39 consecutive hours, fell asleep at the wheel on the Turner Turnpike in Oklahoma, crashed, suffered a fractured skull, and woke up in a hospital four days later. One of the Los Angeles newspapers had erroneously reported that he was killed. His role went to Don Rickles.

Although fate prevented him from landing that coveted role with Clark Gable (with whom, incidentally, Slovenian American actress Audrey Totter proudly co-starred in Any Number Can Play, in 1949), Gorshin, after leaving the hospital, appeared in several movies, among them as a Brando-like method actor in the motion picture, The Bells Are Ringing (1960) with recognized stars Judy Holliday and Dean Martin (born to Italian parents as Dino Croeth). As Shifrin reports, he also endeared himself to numerous fans as the myopic student bass player in Joe Pasternak’s film, Where the Boys Are.

As we have already seen, Frank started doing impressions of movie stars when he was a high school student in Pittsburgh. He continued doing them during his two-year stint in the army and, after his honorable discharge, in civilian life. In 1958, he got his first Hollywood nightclub appearance at the Purple Onion. In 1966, he became the first impressionist ever to headline in a Las Vegas “main room,” where his engagements soon included the Flamingo, the MGM Grand, the Sahara, the International, and the Aladdin. A partial list of other famous spots includes the Empire Room of Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York, the Blue Max in Chicago, the Diplomat Hotel in Miami, the Yoric’s in Dallas, the Harrah’s Club in Reno, the

In motion picture “The Upper Crust”

In Operation Primetime (TV)

Goliath Awaits

As Smiley Wilson in “Edge of Night”

As Riddler in the Batman Series
pneumonia. He has been a heavy smoker for most of his adult life, consuming up to 10 packs a day. "It doesn’t start. If you are a smoker, try to reduce or, even better, quit smoking. You won’t endanger others, including your own children, with second-hand smoke. You can save plenty of money spent on cigarettes. Besides, you’ll have more to spend on things that are more fun and enjoyable."

Frank Gorshin was an idol of millions of American and foreign tourists. According to Tony Brown’s "Impression Shows and Impersonations," Gorshin was "an idol of millions of American and foreign tourists, as well as in prestigious reference works, including Who’s Who in America, Gorshin was "an idol of millions of American and foreign tourists.

Frank Gorshin's Special Talent "(The Chicago Tribune, Feb. 20, 1986), "This artist knows how to profile a performer without baiting him or humiliating him. He has the fine gift of letting fellow-men as hidden and loveable at the same time, so his show has consistent warmth that is possibly unique. ... Gorshin is so good at what he does that one has to look twice to grasp the nature of his skill."

As reported by Tony Brown, "The Plain Dealer" theater critic (March 18, 2001), master impersonator Gorshin starred playing Burns, a one-man, evening-length show also in Cleveland, where he appeared evenings through April 8, 2005. He had played the lovable, naively, cigar-smoking star of American comedy, George Burns. Earlier, the 90-minute show received love-le lection shows, and televised shows. On the very night of McKinley’s writing, Gorshin, the lifelong impersonator, was also featured on film in Las Vegas, playing himself. Jeff Wilson of The Associated Press remembered Gorshin on the same day in The Seattle Times as the "impressionist with 100 faces. ... His wife of 48 years, Christine, was at his side when he died on Tuesday at Providence St. Joseph Medical Center." He also quoted Gorshin’s longtime friend Fred Westbrook: "Frank was fun, wild and always a class act. Here is a guy who always wore great clothes, stood up when a woman walked into the room — he was a gentleman."