A Shared but Divisive Borderland Heritage?

Silenced Memories, Suppressed Hybrid Ethnic Identities, and Parallel Worlds on the Slovenian-Italian Border

Katja Hrobat Virloget

Abstract *This chapter presents the original research results from an ethnographic field study in villages along the Slovenian-Italian border, inhabited by two antagonistic ethnic groups: Slovenians as locals and Italians as Istrian refugees after the Second World War. These two communities lived mainly in parallel worlds, with collective identities shaped by competing victimhood discourses and mutual resentments. However, in recent times, subtle steps towards integration have become noticeable, as people's everyday gestures strive to transcend the political discourses of hatred.*

*Der Aufsatz stellt die ersten Ergebnisse einer ethnographischen Feldstudie vor, die sich in dieser Form erstmals Dörfern an der slowenisch-italienischen Grenze widmete, die von zwei antagonistischen Gruppen bewohnt werden: Slowen*innen als Einheimische und Italiener*innen als istrische Geflüchtete nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Diese beiden Gemeinschaften leben größtenteils in Parallelwelten, und erst in jüngster Zeit sind subtile Fortschritte hin zu Integration und Versöhnung spürbar geworden – getragen von alltäglichen Gesten, die den politischen Hassdiskursen entgegenwirken.*

Ce chapitre présente les résultats originaux d'une étude de terrain ethnographique menée dans des villages situés le long de la frontière italo-slovène, habités par deux groupes ethniques antagonistes : les Slovènes, population locale, et les Italien·ne·s, réfugié·e·s istrien·ne·s arrivé·e·s après la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Ces deux communautés ont longtemps vécu dans des mondes parallèles, avec des identités collectives façonnées par des discours de victimisation concurrents et des ressentiments mutuels. Toutefois, des signes subtils d'un rapprochement ont récemment été observés, à travers des gestes quotidiens qui cherchent à dépasser les discours politiques de haine.

The article reflects on conflicting memories along the former Yugoslav-Italian border, where the events throughout the 20th century have left a difficult, contested legacy—a common unifying and at the same time divisive intangible memorial heritage. The deepest wounds in the past decades in this multi-ethnic borderland society, with constant border changes, have been inflicted by the border fascistic, anti-Slavic racism and violence,[1] as well as the mass migration of (mostly) Italian-speaking inhabitants after the Second World War (WWII), the so-called Istrian exodus.[2] Although Slovenia's accession to the European Union in 2004 has formally erased the national border, although more than seventy years have passed since the most violent events, and although some reconciliatory efforts have been made at a political level regarding the border's *lieux de mémoire*, the collective—and consequently:

1 For further information, cf. Catalan, T. (Ed). (2015). *Fratelli al Massacro. Linguaggi e Narrazioni della Prima Guerra Mondiale*. Viella; Catalan, T. (2018). L'Antislavismo a Trieste. Vecchi e Nuovi Stereotipi nella Stampa Satirica del Novecento. *Memoria e Ricerca*, 59(3), 417–430; Catalan, T., & Mezzoli, E. (2018). Antislavismo. Discorsi e Pratiche in Italia e in Europa Sudorientale tra Otto e Novecento. *Memoria e Ricerca*, 59 (3), 347–451; Bajc, G., & Klabjan, B. (2021). *Ogenj, Ki Je Zajel Evropo. Narodni Dom v Trstu 1920–2020*, Cankarjeva založba; Tonet, M. (2024). The Voicing and Silencing of Ethnicity and the Notion of 'Resistance' in the Struggle for Ethnic Recognition. From the Slovenian Minority in Trieste to Quechua Indigenous Communities in the Peruvian Andes. *Studia Ethnologica Croatica*, 36(1), 399–427.

2 The Istrian exodus represents the final stage of (mainly) Italian emigration from Yugoslavia, which started shortly after the Second World War, when the Yugoslav National Liberation Army occupied the territories along the Adriatic coast (Istria, Dalmatia) and ceded them to the Kingdom of Italy, marked by fascist ideology after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The total registered population of ethnic Italians in coastal towns of the Slovenian part of Istria dropped from 90 % before the war to a mere 10.5 % after the exodus (Cf. Troha, N. (1997). STO – Svobodno Tržaško Ozemlje. In S. Valentinčič (Ed.), *Zbornik Primorske – 50 let* (pp. 56–60). Primorske novice). According to census data, in the period from 1945 to 1958, 49,132 people left the Slovenian part of the territory, mostly Italians, but also Slovenes and Croats. Among these, 27,810 are counted as optants; between 200,000 and the possibly exaggerated 350,000 persons left the whole of Istria (including the Croatian part). Cf. Volk, S. (2003). *Istra v Trstu: Naselitev Istrskih in Dalmatinskih Ezulov in Nacionalna Bonifikacija na Tržaškem 1954–1966*. Zgodovinsko Društvo za Južno Primorsko, 193; Kacin-Wohinz, M., & Troha, N. (Eds.). (2001). *Slovensko-Italijanski Odnosi 1880–1956. Poročilo Slovensko-Italijanske Zgodovinsko-Kulturne Komisije. I Rapporti Italo-Sloveni 1880–1956. Relazione della Commissione Storico-Culturale Italo-Slovena. Slovene-Italian Relations 1880–1956. Report of the Slovene-Italian Historical and Cultural Commission*, Nova Revija. Retrieved December 18, 2024 from https://www.sistory.si/cdn/publikacije/44001-45000/44516/slo-ita-odnosi-1880-1956_2000.pdf; Ballinger, P. (2003). *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*. Princeton University Press, 1, 275. However, the ethnic identification of the migrants has been recently discussed in the frame of 'national indifference,' from hybridity, opportunism, and fluidity to indeterminacy, see further Orlić, M. (2023). *Identità di Confine. Storia dell'Istria e degli Istriani dal 1943 a Oggi*. Viella, 167–168.

individual—memories of social groups connected to fascism and the Istrian exodus remain either conflicting or parallel.[3]

These traumatic memories of the contested multi-cultural and multi-ethnic borderland region of the former Iron Curtain have been politically exploited and today compete for their exclusive victimhood. Some memorial narratives have been silenced and negated in the dominant hegemonic discourses, while others have been un-silenced and mythologized to construct national victimization discourses.[4] As is often the case in post-WWII Europe, the memories "serve[ ] as a protective shield against other memories; one memory is used to immunize oneself against another. […] The fixation on the crimes of others makes one's own conveniently disappear."[5] According to the psychoanalyst Paulo Fonda, the Slovenian-Italian ethnically mixed borderland communities are an exemplary case of a paranoid-schizophrenic human condition where collective myths about the idealization of ourselves and the projection of evil onto a collective enemy emerge. The creation of a collective enemy reinforces positive feelings about one's own group, and negative, aggressive affect outwards. In this distorted image, the 'other' for centuries has been demonized and dehumanized, deprived of any positive trait, any resemblance, and any humanity. He or she simply becomes a Jew, Slav, fascist, communist, Muslim, etc., who has nothing human anymore.[6] As Alexandra Schwell argues, borders are objects of agency and "an essential part of social imaginaries and processes of selfing and othering."[7]

This chapter will be specifically interested in the constructions of silences, divisive memories, and ways of '(non)co-habitation' of diverse groups linked to fascist oppression and the Istrian exodus along the Slovenian-Italian border. The ethnographic research has been conducted in the frame of the research project "Ethnography of Silence(s)" (ARIS J6-50198).[8] While there has already been extensive writing on the silences and construction of memories regarding the Istrian exodus in the

3 Cf. Hrobat Virloget, K. (2023). *Silences and Divided Memories: The Exodus and its Legacy in Postwar Istrian Society*. Berghahn, 16–70.

4 Cf. Ballinger, P. (2004). Exhumed Histories: Trieste and the Politics of (Exclusive) Victimhood. *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, 6(2), 145–159; Hrobat Virloget. *Silences and Divided Memories*; on Italian memory constructions cf. Focardi, F. (2020). *Nel Cantiere della Memoria: Fascismo, Resistenza, Shoah, Foibe*. Viella.

5 Assmann, A. (2007). Europe: A community of Memory? *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, 40, 11–25, here 21.

6 Cf. Fonda, P. (2009). Nedomačni Notranji Tujec. In L. Accati & R. Cogoy (Eds.), *Fojbe: Primer Psihopatološke Recepcije Zgodovine* (pp. 105–112). [Translated from Accati, L., & Cogoy, R. (Eds.) (2007). *Das Unheimliche in der Geschichte. Die Foibe. Beiträge zur Psychopathologie Historischer Rezeption*. Trafo].

7 Schwell, A. (2019). 'Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad…?:' Populism and the Threatened Border in Austria. *Cargo Journal for Cultural and Social Anthropology*, (1–2), 25–48, here 27.

8 Financed by The Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency, led by Katja Hrobat Virloget, from 1 October 2023 to 30 September 2026.

Slovenian and Italian national contexts,[9] this chapter offers some reflections based on new ethnographic field research. The field research was done with students in the villages of Contovello/Kontovel and Prosecco/Prosek on the Italian side of the border in 2024.[10] These two neighboring villages were chosen because of their interesting recent historical development, which involved the immigration of Istrian refugees some decades after WWII. While the two old villages have been inhabited by Slovenian-speaking people as part of the Slovenian national minority in Italy, the new part called Borgo San Lazario was constructed in the 1950s and 1960s to accommodate Istrian refugees, mostly from Koper/Capodistria and the surrounding area. A similar history can also be found in the neighboring village of S. Croce/Sv. Križ with the construction of 'the new houses' (*case nuove*) for Istrian refugees, from where some interlocutors originate.[11]

In addition, recent observations will also derive from the five interdisciplinary workshops conducted in the frame of the project entitled "My Story from Silence"[12] (*Moja zgodba iz tišine*), which aimed to address traumatic memories of people living on both sides of the Slovenian-Italian border. For the very first time, all these diverse borderland groups, whose conflicting memories often involve blaming one another for their suffering, came together to meet and listen to each other: the ones who stayed behind in Yugoslavia as Italian minority, Istrian refugees after WWII (Istrian exodus), immigrants from Slovenia and other republics of former Yugoslavia in the emptied Istrian towns, as well as members of the Slovenian minority in Italy.[13]

As will be shown, this border situation on the micro level in these villages between Slovenians and Italian refugees is a mirror of the difficult relationship between Slovenian and Italian national narratives of history on the macro level.

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9 Cf. Hrobat Virloget. *Silences and Divided Memories.*

10 The field researchers were Katja Hrobat Virloget, Petra Kavrečič Božeglav, Martina Tonet, and their students: Kristina Kovačić, Monika Cergolj, Gaja Grižon, Nikita Kuster, as well as 16 interlocutors, 2–5 April 2024. A special thanks goes to Sonia Covolo Ciuch for kindly providing the interviewees for the research.

11 An interview was conducted with one interlocutor, and a public discussion about the coexistence of these two populations was held with her and another resident of S. Croce/Križ.

12 The grant project was implemented under the financial scheme "Incentives for Solutions: A Long-Lived Society," co-financed by the Istria and Karst NGO Forum—ISKRA and the Ministry of Public Administration from the Fund for NGOs (through the non-governmental organization PINA).

13 Cf. Hrobat Virloget, K. (2023). Un-Silencing Traumatic Memories along the Slovenian-Italian Border. The Case of Psychotherapeutic and Anthropological Workshops. *Etnološka Tribina*, 53(46), 141–161; Švara, M., & Hrobat Virloget, K. (2024). My Silent Story: Conflicted Memories, Silences and Intergenerational Traumas. *The Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 69(2), 298–322.

1. Silencing Memories and Hybrid Ethnic Identity in the Borderlands

While much has been written about the reasons for the silence of the Italian Istrians who stayed behind in Yugoslavia after most of the Italians (90 %) migrated from the newly annexed zone of Istria to Yugoslavia after WWII,[14] the silence is also encountered on the other, Italian side of the border. When it was decided to conduct research on the Slovenians and Istrian refugees in the hinterland of Trieste, some were astonished at why we were addressing such sensitive topics. A similar observation was made at the public discussion on cohabitation in S. Croce/Sv. Križ,[15] where a Slovenian participant from the north Italian border area mentioned that he had never been told about the settlement of Istrian refugees in the Karstic villages with Slovenian-speaking inhabitants, because it was a kind of taboo topic for Slovenians.

The silence could also be noted in the fact that only a few Istrian refugees agreed to be interviewed by us as researchers from Slovenia, while there was no problem finding Slovenian interlocutors. One of the reasons might have been our research position: If Slovenians were glad to talk with the 'compatriots' from the other side of the border, for Istrian refugees we represented the 'mythical other,' the perpetrator who made them lose everything. The intergenerational silence of the Istrian refugees[16] was clear at least in one case, when a daughter of an Istrian refugee called her father to help with the interview, and—for the first time in her life—she heard about his refugee experiences. As Roberta Altin notices, the exodus was not talked about in the families of the Istrian refugees, although the first and second generations were both affected. Instead, they wanted to erase any memory that was fueling the shame of being a refugee, of being out of place, marginalized, displaced.[17]

As Stefano Pontiggia observes, the Istrian refugees, especially their children who joined the refugee associations, filled their memory gaps caused by parental silence by adhering to the newly established shared collective memory which provided them with a political, moral, and ideological sense. In one way, this collective memory reproduces the experience, even if not lived personally, of the emotional pain through the categories of genocide and victimization, while on the other hand it enables them to auto-define themselves in the present as *esuli*, Istrian refugees. With this, the associative collective memory merges with the historical national narrative, where they are perceived as the martyrs of the homeland with an identity

14 Cf. Hrobat Virloget. *Silences and Divided Memories.*

15 Public discussion on 3 December 2024 at the National Slovenian Library, Trieste, organized by Štefan Čok.

16 Cf. Pontiggia, S. (2013). *Storie Nascoste. Antropologia e Memoria dell'Esodo Istriano a Trieste*. Aracne, 89, 103.

17 Cf. Altin, R. (2024). *Border Heritage. Migration and Displaced Memories in Trieste*. Lexington Books, 104, 119.

denoted by a surplus of Italian essence. In the associations, the collective memory is constantly reproduced, which gives meaning to everyday life, but also makes them live in a phantasmal world, characterized by nostalgia.[18] The term *profugho* (refugee) or *esule* (exiled) was a common insult.[19] An interlocutor, who lived for a time in S. Croce/Sv. Križ, mentioned an occasion when her mother was referred to as *esule* in a conversation, which was immediately followed by an excuse for naming her in this way. However, as Stefano Pontiggia observes, later on, with the help of re-elaboration of the associative collective memory, the initial shame and guilt transformed into pride for the origins and stories of the Istrian refugees.[20]

Interestingly, these kinds of imaginations were missing among refugees who have not been part of the refugee association and refused to live obsessed with the past. While the associated refugees identify themselves in ideological and political terms (as *esuli*, Istrian refugees), those not belonging to organizations define themselves in geographical terms (as Istrians).[21] Hence, the individuals not associated with associations lack milieus of memory in the frame of Halbwachs's theory, i. e. their singular memories are not consolidated into a unified memory.[22]

The above-mentioned interlocutor (and, at the same time: a writer) warned against another kind of silence in the refugees' narrations—the silence of the mixed Italian-Slavic origins in the families. Only after her own research on the origins of some family members, she discovered her Slavic origins besides the Italian ones. As she said,

> this part of my story has been the part in the shadow. Because, for various reasons, but also because my mother and grandmother would have had to come to terms with the non-Italian part of their ancestry. And in this climate of hyper-nationalism, of having to defend Italian-ness, that was not an option, so she told me only a part of it.[23]

However, the change of identity from Slovenian Istrian to Italian Istrian could also have happened before the exodus, as our interlocutor in the project "My Story from

18 Cf. Pontiggia. *Storie Nascoste*, 111, 122, 152.

19 Cf. Altin. *Border Heritage*, 119.

20 Cf. Pontiggia. *Storie Nascoste,* 85, 102.

21 Cf. Pontiggia. *Storie Nascoste,* 120, 123, 126, 153.

22 Cf. Gensburger, S. (2019). Memory and Space: (Re)reading Halbwachs. In S. De Nardi et al. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Memory and Place* (pp. 69–76). Routledge, here pp. 69–76, 72–73; Halbwachs, M. (2001). *Kolektivni Spomin*. Studia Humanitatis. [Translated from: Halbwachs, M. (1952). *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire*. Presses Universitaires de France. Translated by Drago B. Rotar].

23 Unpublished interview conducted by the author as part of field research in Trieste, 5 April 2024.

Silence" told us. His Slovenian-speaking parents from the suburbs of Piran/Pirano stopped speaking the Slovene Istrian dialect after they moved to the urban environment of Piran/Pirano. Even after the exodus, he only occasionally heard Slovenian from his grandmother, who moved with them to Trieste, but he did not learn Slovenian himself, because it had disappeared from his family.[24] According to Sandi Volk, the Italian identity was social rather than linguistic or cultural in nature. The inhabitants of towns and rural administrative centers considered themselves to be townspeople and looked down on the inhabitants of surrounding places. The pressure to assimilate was greater there, and it appears that Italian identity was inseparable from the superior social position.[25]

The Istrian exodus was a highly complex phenomenon, but it was reduced to a uniform experience by imposing a monolithic and 'pure' Italian national identity on the refugees. This process denied the existence of ambiguous borderland identities and suppressed their hybrid, flexible sense of belonging. The Istrian refugees had to adhere to a rigidly nationalistic interpretation of the 'good' Italians against the 'bad commies' from the other side of the border.[26] As has been demonstrated by the research of Mila Orlić, in many cases the Istrian identity of the multilingual borderland after WWII was characterized by "national indifference."[27] She noted cases of people rebelling against national identification, especially in the rural areas of Istria, and gave examples of the fluidity, indeterminacy, changeability, and opportunistic adaptation of national identities.[28] So, for instance, a Yugoslavian politician observed that these people from Istria do not care if they are Italian or Slav, but rather define their identity according to the question "under whom will I live better, under Italy or under Yugoslavia?"[29] The author demonstrates how both states, Italy and Yugoslavia, invested enormous effort after WWII in constructing a 'pure' national identity of the border population, whose identities in reality were hybrid and fluid. In doing so, the researcher highlights the processes of nation-building through state apparatuses.[30] This adaptation of the national identity of these borderland people was also observed in the fieldwork among Istrian refugees of Ital-

24 Cf. Švara & Hrobat Virloget. My Silent Story, 308–309.

25 Cf. Volk. *Istra v Trstu*, 34; on the hybridity of Istrian identity and the conflicts between urban, civilized and Italian, versus rural, Slav and barbaric, see Hrobat Virloget. *Silences and Divided Memories*, 60–62, 75–87; Baskar, B. (2002). *Dvoumni Mediteran: Študije o Regionalnem Prekrivanju na Vzhodnojadranskem Območju*. Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko, 98–120; Verginella, M. (2017). O Zgodovinjenju Dihotomije Mesta in Podeželja. *Acta Histriae,* 25(3), 57–72.

26 Cf. Altin. *Border Heritage*, 157, 160, 162; Focardi. *Nel Cantiere della Memoria*.; see also Orlić. *Identità di Confine*.; Hrobat Virloget. *Silences and Divided Memories.*

27 Orlić. *Identità di Confine*, 123.

28 Cf. Orlić. *Identità di Confine*, 119–131, 152–154.

29 Orlić. *Identità di Confine*, 131.

30 Cf. Orlić. *Identità di Confine*, 179.

ian, Slovenian, and Croatian origins in Australia.[31] It was noted that among members of the Italian Trieste club Alabarda, many have silenced the Slavic origins of their family members, while the Slovenian- and Croatian-speaking refugees have silenced their (Slavic) mother tongue as soon as they entered the refugee camps in or around Trieste: The Slavic language was only whispered in the intimacy of families, some of them even had to learn Italian, and they accepted their 'new' national identity written on the refugee identity cards as being Italian. As several researchers noted, through their 'option,' many Istrians chose or adapted their national identity to their desire to migrate. The exodus and the 'opting' were decisive for the formation of national identity and a turning point for assimilation, as an uncertain number of Croats and Slovenes adopted an Italian identity in the denationalizing process. Choosing an Italian identity meant receiving help from the Italian state and associations of *esuli*,[32] in this case with the opportunities for overseas migration.

2. "Invisible Border" and Parallel Worlds

As Pamela Ballinger has argued, the histories around the Slovenian-Italian border can be described as "exhumed"—histories that were silenced and neglected for a time, with selected parts of them later being reused to construct a politics of exclusive victimhood.[33] A strong competitive victimhood of the two groups in question was noted, on the one side among the migrants of the Istrian exodus, living in the border town of Trieste in Italy, and on the other side among the Slovenians. Although Ballinger has focused on the Slovenians living in Trieste as a national minority, whereas our own research emphasizes the Slovenians living in the hinterland of Trieste, both approaches reflect and compare the dominant Slovenian memory construction:[34] While Pamela Ballinger focuses on the (re-)construction of politics of memory of the *lieux de mémoire* in Trieste, this chapter reflects on a similar social

31 From the author's fieldwork in Adelaide in the Slovenian club Adelaide and the Italian Club Alabarda, Australia, between 25 August 2024 and 14 September 2024 in the frame of the project "Ethnography of Silence(s)," which has not yet been published.

32 Cf. Volk. *Istra v Trstu*, 32–35; Hrobat Virloget. *Silences and Divided Memories*, 75–87; Pupo, R., & Panjek, A. (2004). Riflessioni sulle Migrazioni ai Confini Italo-Jugoslavi (1918–60): Identità, Politica e Metodo. In C. Donato & P. Nodari & A. Panjek (Eds.), *Oltre l'Italia e l'Europa. Beyond Italy and Europe. Ricerche sui Movimenti Migratori e sullo Spazio Multiculturale* (pp. 343–360). Edizioni Università di Trieste, here p. 352; Ballinger, P. (2006). Opting for Identity: The Politics of International Refugee Relief in Venezia-Giulia, 1948–1952, *Acta Histriae*, 14(1), 115–140.

33 Ballinger. Exhumed Histories.

34 Cf. Hrobat Virloget. *Silences and Divided Memories;* Ballinger. Exhumed Histories; Ballinger. *History in Exile.*

setting, however not in the urban context, but in an interesting rural environment in the rural hinterland of Trieste.

The above-mentioned researched villages are cases of the intentional building of separated refugee settlements in the Trieste borderland zone that became a medium of the 'national bonification' or Italianization of territories, especially in the surroundings of Trieste, where, after this process, Slovenians became a national minority even though they had previously been the majority. By settling the Istrian refugees next to villages inhabited by Slovenians in Italy, the politics exploited the migrants by forming nuclei of national patriotism and anti-communism. Almost every larger Slovenian settlement around Trieste got its refugee counterpart in the immediate vicinity. In this process, the land (especially commons) was expropriated from Slovenians, which had not been done even during the time of fascism.[35] According to the interviews conducted with the Slovenian- and Italian-speaking inhabitants of the researched villages, the land expropriation was the most frequently mentioned cause of the Slovenians' anger towards the Istrian refugees. Some refugees were even well aware of this when they spoke about the anger of Slovenians, while also pointing out that it was they who had lost everything, thus further fueling the discourse of victimhood. On the other hand, the typical resentment of the Slovenians is the stolen land, as one person mentioned:

> But you know why, where that came from, they couldn't see us because we were here. […] To build the villages on the whole plateau, not just here. Who was the owner of the plots, where the villages were to be built were taken away from the owners and acquired for next to nothing. That was not good even then. But just think, they were saying all sorts of things to us, that they had taken everything away from us.[36]

The ethnographic research supports Sandi Volk's observations that the separation of Istrian refugees from the local population—through their placement in specially constructed residential complexes—further reinforced the divide, as locals perceived these arrangements as preferential treatment. This situation only encouraged the refugees to tighten their ranks in self-defense against an environment they perceived as hostile, which made them strengthen their refugee community and feel unique.[37] Many interlocutors emphasize that Istrian refugees lived separately from others, in conditions resembling ghettos.[38] As Roberta Altin observes, the Italian government aimed to place the refugees on the fringes of society to keep

35 Cf. Volk. *Istra v Trstu*; see also Orlić. *Identità di Confine*, 176.

36 Unpublished interview conducted by the author as part of field research in Prosecco/Prosek, 2 April 2024.

37 Cf. Volk. *Istra v Trstu*, 281.

38 See also Orlić. *Identità di Confine*, 177.

them out of the daily life of the local population. In the collection/refugee centers in the vicinity of the Slovenian villages (built before the new settlements), the structure imposed the regulation of movement, which made it almost impossible to mix with the local population. Moreover, the Istrian 'boroughs' touched the sensitivities of the local Slovenians, who still had fresh memories of the suffering under fascist violence.[39]

In the interviews with people of both communities, it could be noticed that they compete in portraying themselves as victims. This is, according to Aleida Assmann, a common strategy of memory practice after WWII when one memory serves "as a protective shield against other memories; one memory is used to immunize oneself against another:"[40] Slovenians blamed the Istrian refugees for not knowing their story of suffering under fascism, while they were aware of the stories of the *esuli*, which became part of the Italian national narrative as the national martyrs for the Italian-ness.[41] Not only are the memories of the fascist violence and anti-Slavic racism against Slovenians and Croatians denied in the past and contemporary negationist politics of the dominant Italian narrative ('the missing Nürnberg'), the Italian narrative also constructs the imagination of Italians being the victim and not the perpetrator of the WWII crimes.[42]

What is especially problematic for the Slovenians in this borderland region, most being active in the partisan resistance, is the political equation of the communist totalitarian regime with the organized resistance against Nazi and Fascist regimes.[43] Natka Badurina warns about the problem of the generalization of the holocaust (or "holocaustisation"[44] of memory), when this universal European memory can be used to deny and conceal specific local responsibilities, crimes, and violations of human rights, especially against other national minorities. This is the case of the memorial to the concentration camp in Trieste, the *Risiera di San Sabba*, where the memory of the Shoah has overlapped and denied the memory of the extermination of the Slovenians and partisans as a form of resistance against Nazi and fascist totalitarian

39 Cf. Altin. *Border Heritage*, 99, 122; Nemec, G. (2015). The Hardest Years: Private Stories and Public Acknowledgment in the Recollections of Istrian Italians, either Exiled or Stayed Behind. In K. Virloget Hrobat & C. Gousseff & G. Corni (Eds.), *At Home but Foreigners: Population transfers in 20th Century Istria* (pp. 145–158). Založba Annales; Verginella, M. (2008). *Il Confine degli Altri. La Questione Giuliana e la Memoria Slovena*. Donzelli.

40 Assmann. Europe, 21.

41 Cf. Pontiggia. *Storie Nascoste*; Altin. *Border Heritage*; Orlić. *Identità di Confine.*

42 Cf. Orlić. *Identità di Confine*, 196–205; Badurina, N. (2023). *Strah od Pamćenja*. Disput.

43 Cf. Badurina. *Strah od Pamćenja*, 84–87, 151–186, 245–247.

44 Badurina. *Strah od Pamćenja*, 131.

regimes.[45] As the Communication "No Place for Hate"[46] claims, indifference or ignorance presents a threat to the people facing discrimination, and "what hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor, but the silence of the bystander."[47] Although the Italians were not only bystanders, their current ignorance and denial of the fascist anti-Slavic racism and violence is extremely painful for the victims of Slavic origins.

As noted by several researchers, the Istrian refugees experienced brutal rejection from their compatriots in Italy. They were accused of being fascists and of stealing jobs and homes from 'true' Italians,[48] which was also repeatedly heard by the interlocutors in the villages of our field research.[49] As Slovenians commented, if you were not an Istrian, you could not get a job. And as an Istrian refugee told us, the main perception of them was enclosed in the vulgar saying: "Those damned Istrians who steal our bread." Besides, the Istrian refugees were even perceived as Slavs by Italians, mostly in the derogatory sense of "*sciavi*."[50] Such comments made them hurt even more, as they finally felt like strangers in a homeland for which they had sacrificed themselves.[51] The bad treatment of their compatriots led to the reinforcement of the Italian-ness and the construction of the pure identity, denying the hybrid ethnic origins.[52] As an Istrian refugee commented, "we were caught between two fires," the Slovenes and the Italians. And she added: "My defense at school was the uniform." Children of *esuli* experienced rejection in schools, making them ashamed of their origins.[53] Hence, an interesting paradox occurred: The Italian language, which was a medium that enabled them to opt out of Istria, in Italy became a barrier to their integration due to their inadequate linguistic knowledge of Italian.[54]

According to the interlocutor from S. Croce/Sv. Križ, in the first years, "an invisible border" was drawn between these two communities, and even children used to

45 Cf. Badurina. *Strah od Pamćenja*,132–186.

46 European Commission: *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. No place for Hate: a Europe United against Hatred*. Retrieved December 9, 2024 from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023JC0051.

47 European Commission: *Joint Communication to the European Parliament*.

48 Cf. Altin. *Border Heritage*, 99; Orlić. *Identità di Confine*, 171–179; Pontiggia. *Storie Nascoste*, 89; Volk. *Istra v Trstu*, 281, 296.

49 A similar conflict regarding the privileges of immigrants was documented in Istria, when the regional authorities encouraged immigration to the emptied towns after the exodus by offering jobs and housing (cf. Hrobat Virloget. *Silences and Divided Memories*).

50 Orlić. *Identità di Confine*, 180; Altin. *Border Heritage*, 156.

51 Cf. Orlić. *Identità di Confine*, 180.

52 Cf. Altin. *Border Heritage*, 161.

53 Cf. Altin. *Border Heritage*, 104.

54 Cf. Orlić. *Identità di Confine*, 186.

throw stones at each other.[55] Schools were separated—though located in the same building—with no shared breaks, while local festivities and masses in the church in Italian and Slovenian were held separately, the latter eventually even in different churches. Besides that, the constant reproach by Slovenians to Istrians was that while they speak Italian, the Istrians do not understand anything of the Slovenian language. The Slovenians felt the Istrians' contempt for the Slovenian language expressed in the thought that was attributed to Istrian refugees, that "even here they have to listen to that damn (Slavic) language."

The sentiment that best illustrates the hostility between the Slovenians and the refugees was expressed by an Istrian refugee: "They wouldn't even accept us—not even dead on their cemetery." That was true when, in the beginning, the Slovenian communities of Prosecco/Prosek and Contovello/Kontovel refused to bury the Istrian refugees in the local cemeteries. It's only in recent decades that this was finally allowed. This everyday situation of two parallel worlds was best expressed by two reflections from Slovenians from these villages, one describing the separated communities as being divided by "the Berlin wall"[56] and another one stating: "The only thing we have in common is the cemetery."

3. Conclusion: Towards the "Winds of Brotherhood"

Despite the parallel worlds in which the Istrian refugee community and the Slovene locals lived, both mentioned "the minimal points of social interaction,"[57] meaning, for instance, the local buses to Trieste, tobacconists, butchers, and bakery shops. According to many interlocutors, it was the small, everyday gestures—such as exchanging greetings in both languages, *Dober dan/Buon giorno*—that gradually paved the way towards integration. An Istrian refugee from Prosecco/Prosek commented that "the minimal threshold of acceptance" between two divided communities was the grocery shop in the village, where they provided Istrian refugees with goods on credit, and the refugees paid them back later. The Slovenians respected the fact that they actually returned the money, and gradually, mutual trust was built. The interlocutors also mentioned the first Slovenian priest who addressed the refugees by initially organizing a mass in Slovenian, followed by one in Italian. Nevertheless, what most of the interlocutors, from both communities, mentioned was the bonding element of sports. Important moments of integration were the acceptance of Istrian

55 However, somebody from the public in the public discussion on S. Croce/Sv. Križ commented that she was used to playing with the children from "the other side."

56 Sandor Tence, public discussion, 3 December 2024, Trieste.

57 As pointed out by Silvia Zetto Cassano during the public discussion, 3 December 2024, Trieste.

refugees into local Slovenian football clubs.[58] As ethnologists argue, tradition or heritage can have a cohesive or divisive social role. In this case, the tradition, the local carnival, was mentioned too, which can similarly function as a medium for bridging divided communities.[59]

However, today some interlocutors are much more optimistic concerning the dialog between the divided communities: "A wind of brotherhood" was noted,[60] beginning with sport and the everyday small gestures to the new tradition of the joint lighting of the Christmas tree lights by children from both the Slovenian and Italian schools. As it was mentioned, the biggest sign of change today is the growing interest in Slovenian language courses, which was in the past treated as inferior in the Italian borderland environment.

In conclusion, the anthropological research on the micro level of the villages, inhabited by two antagonistic populations—the newly settled Istrian refugees as Italians and the local Slovenians—reflects the borderland divisive memorial and social heritage on the macro level. Our field research showed the silencing of traumatic memories and hybrid ethnic identities due to the adaptation to new national unifying nationalist discourses, victimhood competition, and parallel worlds between the Italian/Istrian refugee community and the Slovenes. In short, it points to a memorial heritage that, after several decades, still divides the border communities.

Recent steps towards interethnic dialog on the micro level are now mirrored on the macro level at the border. In Italy there is growing interest and respect for the Slovenian language and schools, political reconciliation efforts have been made,[61] and the two divided border towns of Gorizia and Nova Gorica joined forces in a cross-border project of the European Capital of Culture GO25.[62] Despite some political actions aimed at maintaining divided communities, changes towards reconciliation are being sensed, much like on a micro level. What is encouraging in this

58 The football clubs Vesna and Primorje, both with Slovenian names, were mentioned.

59 Cf. Fakin Bajec, J. (2011). *Procesi Ustvarjanja Kulturne Dediščine: Kraševci Med Tradicijo in Izzivi Sodobne Družbe*. Inštitut za Slovensko Narodopisje ZRC SAZU, 287–291; Poljak Istenič, S. (2012). Aspects of Tradition. *Traditiones*, 41(2), 77–89, here 88; Habinc, M. (2009). Prazniki in Tvorjenje Skupnosti. *Glasnik Slovenskega Etnološkega Društva*, 49(1–2), 30–37; a similar thing happened in Istria where some traditions, especially the local carnival or local dances, were the medium of integrating the new settlers into the local community (mostly Italians in the beginning), see Hrobat Virloget. *Silences and Divided Memories*, 230–232.

60 By Sandor Tence, a local Slovenian from S. Croce/Križ, during the public discussion, 3/12/2024, Trieste.

61 Cf. Hrobat Virloget. *Silences and Divided Memories*, 54–55.

62 In my opinion, supported by numerous interviews with the *esuli*, what is lacking at the political level as an act of reconciliation is Italy's provision of funds to the Istrian refugees—funds that Slovenia paid out as a condition for joining the European Union, and, sadly, after several decades, remain sitting in the bank, unbeknownst to the refugees; see Hrobat Virloget. *Silences and Divided Memories*, 49.

divisive border heritage is seeing how people transcend the political discourses that promote hatred and division on a daily level and seek small ways towards dialog and reconciliation.

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Katja Hrobat Virloget

Professor and Head of the Department of Anthropology and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Primorska, Koper (Slovenia)

Research Interests: Migrations, Intangible Heritage, Anthropology of Memory, Folklore Studies

She has recently received several prizes for her book 2021 monograph, *V Tišini Spomina*, about the Istrian Exodus (published by Berghahn books in 2023 as *Silences and Divided Memories. The Exodus and its Legacy in Post-War Istrian Society*). Since 2023, she is the leader of the anthropological research project *Ethnography of Silence(s)* (ARIS J6-50198), and since 2025 of the international CERV project *RE4Healing: Crossborder Remembrance, Reconnection, Restoring and Resilience*.