

## “Istrian exodus” Between official and alternative memories, between conflict and reconciliation

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Volume 39, Number 2, 2017

Échanges d'histoires, passages d'expériences et jeux de la mémoire  
Memories at stake: Sharing stories and exchanging experiences

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1051662ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051662ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Virloget, K. H. (2017). “Istrian exodus”: Between official and alternative memories, between conflict and reconciliation. *Ethnologies*, 39(2), 31–50. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051662ar>

Article abstract

This article touches on the sensitive topic of the so-called Istrian exodus, which has been stirring conflict in political discourses between Italy and the former Yugoslavia, later Slovenia and Croatia, for more than six decades. It analyses different forms of case-studies of peace-making memories, such as political discourses, commemorations, monuments, literature, film, theatre, etc. The research focuses on the emptied and resettled space of Istria after the exodus. The author takes into consideration literary and fine art works or performances that have touched upon that contested past, provided reflections, or had some impact on the present-day Istrian population. It analyses the relation between institutional and alternative forms of memory, and the interplay between conflicting and appeasing discourses.

## “ISTRIAN EXODUS”

*Between official and alternative memories, between conflict and reconciliation*

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### **Introduction: “Istrian exodus”**

The so-called “Istrian exodus,” from the time of delineation of national borders between Yugoslavia and Italy after WW II, affords an excellent opportunity to study questions concerning the relationship between dominant and silenced memories, hegemonic and alternative heritages, identities, place attachment, history appropriation etc.<sup>1</sup> This paper analyses an interplay between different forms of memories regarding this contested past, which has been stirring conflict in political discourses between Italy on one side and the former Yugoslavia, later Slovenia and Croatia (as former republics) on the other for more than six decades. The main focus concerns the relation between institutional and alternative forms of memory and the interplay between conflicting and appeasing discourses. The analytic approach is based on comparisons between individual memories and memories embedded in political discourses and commemorative speeches on the local, regional, national and international levels. In addition, alternative forms of memory concerning the consequences of fascism and “exodus” as manifested in literature, works of fine art and performances are analysed. Research is based on the memories of present-day inhabitants of Istria, therefore, on memories of those who remained and those who arrived to fill the void after population transfers. This topic of “life in the emptied and, in turn, resettled space” is frequently overlooked when

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1. Research was performed in the scope of the SRA project entitled Migration control in the Slovenian area from the times of Austria-Hungary to independent Slovenia, with project head Aleksej Kalc (J6-8250), and the postdoctoral SRA project The burden of the past: Co-existence in the (Slovenian) Coast region in light of the formation of post-war Yugoslavia (Z6-4317).

focusing the study exclusively on migrants. Finally, the author examines the possibility of forming a shared memory in a complex multicultural society with conflicting and still dividing collective memories that are reflected in difficulties characterising this ethnographic terrain.

Noteworthy in the historical “prelude” leading up to the “Istrian exodus” is that Istria passed under Austrian rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after five centuries as part of Serenissima, the Republic of Venice, then became part of the Italian Kingdom after WW I. More than two decades of repressive fascist anti-Slavic policies and enforced Italianisation of the diverse multi-ethnic population of Istria instigated the migration of 105,000 Slovenes and Croats from the border region of Venezia-Giulia (Verginella 2015: 59–60), of which Istria represented roughly one third. After WW II this contested region in the intersection of Yugoslavian and Italian interests was torn in two by the establishment of a temporary buffer state between the “Democratic West” and “Communist East”: the “Free Territory of Trieste” (FTT). FTT was divided into two zones: Zone A, containing the area around Trieste, was held by the Allies and was integrated into Italy after FTT’s dissolution in 1954. Zone B was held by the Yugoslavian army and was integrated into the former Yugoslavian republics of Croatia and Slovenia (Pirjevec 2000), now independent states.

After the merging of ethnically mixed Istria with Yugoslavia, 90% of the predominantly Italian-speaking population emigrated, mostly from urban areas. 200,000 to 300,000 people left Istria on the whole (Ballinger 2003: 1, 275, n.1). According to Slovenian authorities, 27,810 among them left our study area, the northern part of Istria, which is now under Slovenian jurisdiction, between the years 1945 and 1958. They were mostly Italians (70%), but also Slovenes and Croats (Cunja 2004: 89; Troha 1997: 59). The “Istrian exodus” presents the final stage of the Italian emigration from Yugoslavia which started shortly after WW II, when the Yugoslav national liberation army occupied the territories along the Adriatic coast (Istria, Dalmatia), which were ceded to the Kingdom of Italy after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire (Gombač 2005).

The Yugoslavian authorities filled the void that remained after the Italians left by stimulating an inflow of people from inland Slovenia and the rest of Yugoslavia. This eventually completely transformed the ethnic, social and cultural face of Istria (Gombač 2005: 11). In 1960, a few years after the final phases of the “exodus,” the proportion of native residents in the Slovenian part of Istria dropped to 49 %, according to registry offices, reaching 65 % in rural areas and 33 % in urban settings. The difference

between the rural and urban population is accounted for by the fact that the Italian population was concentrated in urban areas, while the adjacent rural population was largely Slovenian (Titl 1961; Kalc 2015).

Italian and Slovenian historians agree that the consequence of these migrations was ethnic homogenisation of contested lands in favour of annexation to either Italy or Yugoslavia: Italian denationalisation of FTT Zone B and its "Yugoslavisation" with the immigration of Yugoslavians, and "Italianisation" of FTT Zone A with the immigration of Istrian Italians who mostly settled in Slovenian villages around Trieste (Volk 2003: 289–301; Pupo 2000: 203).

A number of scholars discuss Istrian migrations in a broader framework of massive population transfers in Central and Eastern Europe resulting from Allies' policies in the post-WW II period when ethnic homogenisation of nation states was considered as the only way to prevent violence and assure peace and stability (e.g. Ther 2001; Corni 2015; Gousseff 2015; Puppò 2015). Recently Pamela Ballinger (2015) offered an alternative approach reaching outside the classical frame of population transfers, by interpreting the "Istrian exodus" as (post-) imperial processes accompanying the defeat of fascism and Italy's losing its newly acquired territories in the Balkans and Africa.

### **"Istrian exodus" in competitive discourses and victimhoods**

The Italian and Slovenian side have for a long time cultivated parallel official memories specifying different reasons for migrations; they have also come up with different numbers of migrants and differing appellations (Verginella 2000; Ballinger 2003: 42-45). The migrants themselves and Italians in general call the post-war migrants from Istria *esuli*, in the sense of refugees, exiles (Ballinger 2003), while Slovenian historians use the term *optanti*, which comes from the legal right to opt for Italian citizenship (Paris Peace Treaty, 1947 and London Memorandum, 1954), with the consequent obligation to move to Italy (opting to leave) (Pupo 2015; Gombač 2005: 65). Whereas Italian historians speak about the Italian exodus focusing on political (national) reasons (Pupo 2015), Slovenian researchers emphasise economic and other reasons and explain that the post-war migratory movements included both forced and voluntary migrants, Slovenian, Italian and Croatian (Gombač 2005: 118; Hrobat Virloget 2015a: 159–162; Dota 2010; Verginella 2000; Ballinger 2003: 42-45; Panjek 2011).

Conflict memories have also prevailed in dominant political discourses on both sides of the border. In the dominant Slovenian public discourse, the “exodus” is mostly seen as an escape of war criminals (fascists), or presented as a free choice (i.e. opting). A typical individual memory of the “exodus” would be the following:

That somebody would think that we expelled them... Well, maybe there was some pressure, I am not saying that. But... It's not... Now it's written “refugees”... That's not true. They are immigrants, they moved. There... They had a better standard, connections, relatives etc. And they registered officially.

(Slovenian immigrant, high-ranking officer of the Yugoslav army)

Each of these communities demands to be granted the unique status of the victim of historical injustices and the right to the only historical truth. Italian migrants see themselves victims of violence inflicted by the “barbaric” Slavs and the communist rule, but like to “forget” the period of fascist violence against the Slavs after 1919 and its victims (Ballinger 2003: 129-167). The local rhetoric of the *esuli* has paved the ground for the official Italian view (especially between 2007 and 2009) which asserts that during WW II Italy was not the perpetrator but the victim (Fikfak 2009: 358-359). On the other hand, Slovenes and Croats emphasise their status as victims of fascist violence under Italian imperialist rule spanning over 20 years and in WW II crimes (Ballinger 2003: 129-167, 207-244; Baskar 2010: 110–118; Hrobat Virloget 2015a; 2015b: 159-162).

As Aleida Assmann (2007: 15-17, 23) argues, every national memory in Europe is in conflict with the national memory of its neighbour. In national memories, which are selective, generalizing and instrumentalised, the nations assumed two roles after WW II: the victim and/or the resister. A nation recalls its own suffering in order to avoid being reminded of its own guilt. As a result, national memory constructs are not really falsified, but selective as they maintain only a strategic selection of expedient recollections.

### **Monuments and commemorations between divisive and peace-making memories**

Significant steps towards appeasing the conflicting Slovenian and Italian memories have been taken on the international level by acknowledging the victimhood of “the other.” In 2010 a symbolic reconciliatory act was performed, when the presidents of Slovenia, Croatia and Italy came together

to lay a wreath at the national *lieux de mémoire*, at the Slovenian National Hall in Trieste, Italy, the burning of which marks the beginning of over two decades of fascist oppression of Slovenes and Croats, and on the memorial plaque on the railway station in Trieste in memory of “refuges from Istria, Rijeka/Fiume and Dalmatia, who migrated from their homeland after WW II”<sup>2</sup> (Hrobat Virloget 2015a: 160-161).<sup>3</sup> The establishment of a joint Slovenian-Italian historical committee, appointed by both governments in 2000, can be perceived as an attempt at reconciliation as well (Kacin Wohinz, Troha 2001).<sup>4</sup>

However, the analysis of annual commemorations held by the anti-fascist monument in Strunjan/Strugnano<sup>5</sup> has shown that despite the attempts to construct a memory which is shared on the international level, the predominant regional memory of the Slovenian Istrians remains trapped in victimhood as a cornerstone of regional and Slovenian identity, unwilling to hear the memories of “others”, the ones who are living among us – the Italian minority<sup>6</sup> (Hrobat Virloget, Čebren Lipovec 2017). The aim was for the monument to iconographically express and show the double ethnic appurtenance of the area and the common (Slovenian-Italian-Croatian) anti-fascist and freedom struggle during WW II (with two different caps: one of a Slovenian partisan, the other of the Italian *garibaldini*), but at annual commemorations the monument turned out to be the embodiment of divisive memories (Hrobat Virloget, Čebren Lipovec 2017: 51). Although we perceive “the monument as a piece of stone with fixed meanings” that brooks no contradiction (Zombory 2012: 51), the meanings can be reversed in accordance with the contemporary interpretations. The monument was erected in memory of some of the first victims of fascism, killed on March

2. [http://www.bivsi-predsednik.si/up-rs/2007-2012/turk-slo\\_arhiv.nsf/dokumentiweb/4591A73BBE2B45E9C125776200288351?OpenDocument](http://www.bivsi-predsednik.si/up-rs/2007-2012/turk-slo_arhiv.nsf/dokumentiweb/4591A73BBE2B45E9C125776200288351?OpenDocument) (03.05.18).

3. <https://www.rtv slo.si/svet/predsedniski-vrh-v-trstu-z-obiskom-narodnega-doma/234172> (03.05.18).

4. The report was published on the official webpage of the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([http://www.mzz.gov.si/fileadmin/pageuploads/Zakonodaja\\_in\\_dokumenti/dokumenti/Porocilo\\_SIZKK.pdf](http://www.mzz.gov.si/fileadmin/pageuploads/Zakonodaja_in_dokumenti/dokumenti/Porocilo_SIZKK.pdf); 11.06.2018), but not on the Italian side (in Italy it was published by other institutions, interested in the history of the Eastern border).

5. Bilingual toponyms are used at first mention; later only a single name is used: either Slovenian or Italian according to the language of the author or interlocutor.

6. With the London Memorandum (1954) and the Treaty of Osimo (1975), ethnic Italians were granted official minority status as were Slovenes in Italy (Kavrečič 2008).

19, 1921 when a group of Fascists shot from the windows of the local train at local children playing by the railway (Brate 2007).

The analysis of speeches given at the commemoration ceremony by the monument on March 19, 2015 showed that some attempts at reconciliation have been made “from above,” but do not seem to resonate in memories on the regional level. The speech of Milan Brglez, the president of the national assembly, was slightly different from a typical commemoration speech describing the Slovenian resistance under WW II and usually focusing on Fascist victims, the struggle for ethnic emancipation during WW II and heroic resistance as cornerstones of Slovenian identity (Fikfak 2009: 359). Brglez mentions these topics as well, but highlights in his speech the multicultural co-existence and common anti-fascist struggle of Slovenes, Italians and Croats in Istria:

[On fascist killing of children] This action has only been another nail in the coffin of intercultural coexistence in this area. Unfortunately, this event was just the beginning of the persecution of all the people from the area, who spoke Slovenian. Italianising names and surnames, banning Slovenian language and prayer in churches and conversations on streets: all of this happened during the next days, weeks and months. [...] Despite the gathering of black thunder clouds the Slovenian language and culture survived [...]. Without them [Istrian heroes], today Slovenian language would not be spoken in this area. This would not have been possible without brave men and women, be it of Slovenian, Italian or Croatian national provenance, who liberated this territory from the Fascist oppression.

The speech continues with a self-reflection on the dark sides of our “just” liberation fight and describes the national liberation movement and the ethnic change in the demographic structure of post-war Istria. Indirectly, the speech alludes to the consequences of the “Istrian exodus” and this is a rare case of a political speech mentioning events that were predominately silenced in the scope of Slovenian collective memory (Hrobat Virloget 2015a: 161-162). In contrast to this focus on multi-ethnic co-existence in Istria, the mayor of Piran/Pirano gave a commemoration speech typical of the region stressing the victim status and heroism of the Slovenian nation in a typical manner of nationalist discourse, while failing to mention Istrian Italians (see Hrobat Virloget, Čebren Lipovec 2017: 52). It is precisely this kind of (frequent) omission of the role of Istrian Italians in the anti-fascist struggle that offends the members of the Italian minority equating them indirectly with the prevailing Italian fascist stereotype. For this reason, according to the words of the former president of the regional Italian school,

they would eventually withdraw from participating in annual anti-fascist commemorations:

But those were Italians who killed Italians. Those children who were killed in Strugnano were Italians. [...] But at these manifestations sometimes, especially on the part of the older speakers, it comes out differently somehow... They do not speak against Italians, (but) against Fascists, ...yet we are there, present, our schools... It has not always been, well, pleasant to be there at this manifestation... [...] But we said enough, enough of this now, always the same stories, year after year and we have always been polite... But now - enough!

(Hrobat Virloget, Čebon Lipovec 2017: 53)

My Italian interlocutor was disappointed about Italians being so easily equated with fascists as was the case with the commemoration mentioned above and at the same time also in other everyday situations: *This is the leading motif of my life, ever since I was born: Italians – fascists, enough of this! ... But, you know, obviously it's not enough. Whenever someone wants to upset or hurt you, they call you a fascist* (Hrobat Virloget 2015a: 168). Most Italian families holding antifascist and socialist beliefs were bitterly disappointed with socialist Yugoslavia and its promises of brotherhood and equality among ethnic groups after they experienced Yugoslav nationalism coupled with collective criminalisation (Ballinger 2003: 129-167, 207-244; Nemeč 2015; Hrobat Virloget 2015a). On the basis of the interviews, I assert that collective labelling of Italians as fascists was a discourse used mainly by immigrants from Slovenia and other parts of Yugoslavia who never had any contact with Italians before and who adopted a simplistic national memory of Yugoslavians resisting the oppression of Italian fascists. On the other hand, those Slovenes and Croats from the wider region who experienced violent fascist oppression by themselves seem to have a double attitude: recognizing fascism while being aware that not all Italians were fascists.

As Stuart Hall argues, nations construct their identities by selectively binding their chosen and memorable achievements into a "national story" which is reflected in national heritage. The ones that cannot properly see themselves in this mirror cannot properly 'belong' (Hall 2008: 220-221). This seems to be the case with Italians who remained in Istria, and find it difficult or, in fact, impossible to identify with the kind of nationalistic discourses that ignores the common Slovenian-Croatian-Italian anti-fascist fight.

A similar failure in inter-ethnic dialogue from the perspective of the Italian minority was the celebration of the national holiday Day of



Restoration of the Primorska Region to the Motherland<sup>7</sup> held in Koper/Capodistria in 2012 and in Portorož/Portorose in 2005 – the year of establishment and first national celebration of the holiday (Kolednik 2012).<sup>8</sup> This national day of remembrance can be seen as the antipode to the parallel and conflicting national Italian memory, demonstrated by the national Day of Remembrance established one year before (in 2004), to commemorate the “victims of *foibe*,<sup>9</sup> exodus of Istrians, Fiumani (inhabitants of the city Rijeka/Fiume) and Dalmatians from their homelands.”<sup>10</sup> Both national days of remembrance were set up by right-wing governments and both derive from the consequences of the Paris treaty (1947) delineating national borders, which connotes victory for Slovenes and defeat for Italians (Hrobat Virloget 2015a: 160). Most Slovenes did not understand why Italians refused to take part in the celebration held in Koper, a city where the Italian-speaking population was formerly in the majority (before the “exodus”) (Hrobat Virloget 2014: 233). As an Italian interlocutor commented:

For example, if you want to celebrate [the unification of] Italy in Trieste, you will not go to Dolina [a village where the majority population is the Slovenian minority in Italy], will you? [...] And you see. Here they came to celebrate the Slovenian Istria in Capodistria! They could go to Marezige, to Šmarje [Slovenian villages in the hinterland]. You cannot celebrate this in Capodistria, where each wall tells you that it is Venetian, that it is Italian. [...] Well, neither is it inappropriate, because there is nothing left to provoke. What has been broken remains broken. A great deal of damage was done and we should re-excavate Mussolini and cut him into pieces, again, I know, because this is all his fault.

If national holidays are the bearers of collective memory, media that significantly shape imaginaries of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1998) and their interpretation of the past, help to co-create collective

7. A contemporary political initiative (from 2018) would like to replace the word “restoration” with “annexation” to the Motherland (Krebelj 2018).
8. <http://www.politikis.si/2012/09/premier-jansa-ob-65-obletnici-vrmitve-primorske-k-maticni-domovini-te-vrednote-in-odlocenost-so-nam-danes-vsem-lahko-v-navdih/> (19.06.2018).
9. In Italian discourse, the *foibe* (deep natural sinkholes, common in the Karst region and Istria) have acquired political, almost mythical connotations. They are believed to contain the remains of ethnic Italians exclusively, who were killed under the alleged Slavic terror (Fikfak 2009: 358; Ballinger 2003: 98). Slovenian researchers argue that the *foibe* killings were motivated by ideology and included executions of many members of the Slovenian anti-communist home guard and collaborators (Pirjevec 2009).
10. [http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giorno\\_del\\_ricordo](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giorno_del_ricordo) (19.2.15).

identities, mobilise patriotic feelings and practices and legitimise the ruling power (Jezernik 2013: 9, 12, 14; Harvey 2001: 328), then placing such a national celebration in a contested region is an expression of ubiquitous ignorance on the part of the dominant Slovenian memory concerning the sensitive contested past and the existence of “others” among us. By focusing the national memory on the concept of a victim and the associated guilt of another nation, a protective shield from the memories of “the other” is constructed. In this way, it is virtually impossible to acknowledge the status of the victim to “the other” and to deal with one’s own guilt and accountability (Assmann 2007: 17).

### **Literature, film, theatre and other alternative forms of peace-making memories in Istria**

My aim in this chapter is not to analyse an abundance of exile literature dedicated to the “Istrian exodus,” mostly written by *esuli* or their descendants (e.g. literary analysis by Baroni, Benussi 2013). As an ethnologist and not a professional of literary studies, I do not have the knowledge to analyse this kind of material. Nevertheless, as an ethnologist I can, at least, mention a few literary and fine art works or performances that have touched upon the contested past, gave some food for thought to or had some impact in present-day Istria. I will mention some works of art which provided me with some initial insight into contested Istrian history at the beginning of my research. Of course, we have to bear in mind the fact that when we speak about literature and fine art or performance as a form of memory, this mostly concerns the class of intellectuals, while the others are left behind, including the majority of today’s inhabitants of urban centres in Istria, working class immigrants from the republics of the former Yugoslavia who massively migrated to the coast during the 1960s and 1970s (Kalc 2019). They are usually not in the audience at such manifestations.

First, I want to mention Fulvio Tomizza, the Italian Istrian novelist and *esule*, who defines himself as “the writer of the border.”<sup>11</sup> On account of his promotion of multiculturalism, efforts to unify borderland diversities and contradictions, avoid one-sided views etc., he has been translated into many languages, received several awards in Slovenia and Croatia, and has been recognized as a “symbol and positive literary reality of this place of three languages, three cultures and three ethnicities” (Hostnik 2002).<sup>12</sup>

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11. <https://www.rtv slo.si/radiokoper/na-danasnji-dan/26-januar-rodil-se-je-fulvio-tomizza/413331> (06.06.2018).
  12. <https://www.rtv slo.si/radiokoper/na-danasnji-dan/26-januar-rodil-se-je-fulvio-tomizza/413331> (06.06.2018).

An Italian interlocutor told me of a profound silence that surrounded the “exodus”; she only discovered its existence decades later through the works of Tomizza while studying the Italian language at university in Belgrade:

I remember wondering at home, in 54, 55, how there were 43 of us in class during the first year and every day someone went missing. I would return home and ask: “Mom, Vinicio, Lucio, Maria are all gone, where did they go?” “Ah, they will come back, you will see,” she would reply [mother]. I was young, we lived in isolation. But I tell you, I only discovered the exodus when I read the books of Tomizza. And that happened at the University of Belgrade. [...] Nobody talked about that.

During the decades after the “exodus,” speaking about it was “taboo” in Istria even among Italians. This silence can be interpreted as a result of an incompatibility between Italian individual and/or collective memories and the dominant Yugoslavian (latter Slovenian, Croatian) collective memories or/and as a consequence of trauma in a sense that avoiding remembrance protects from re-experiencing the pain (Hrobat Virloget 2017; Levi 2003: 18; Smith 2006: 147-159).

A now established literary manifestation, Forum Tomizza, was launched in 2000, after the death of Tomizza, and takes place every year in Istria across the three national borders: in Trieste in Italy, Koper in Slovenia and Umag in Croatia. From the initial dedication to the life and works of Tomizza, the forum focus shifted towards the discussions on the border and its political, sociological and cultural aspects.<sup>13</sup>

A different type of exile literature in the form of a graphic novel was produced by the third-generation author, the daughter of an *esule*, who migrated as a child of mixed origin, Croatian and Italian (Sansone, Tota 2012). The plot is a kind of road trip going in the direction opposite to that of her mother during exile, being stereotyped somewhere between fascist and foreigner, passing through the refugee centres in Italy to finally reach the place of origin, Rijeka/Fiume in Croatia (compare similar literature on German migrants, Perron in this volume). The title *Palachinche* (like pancakes, *crepes*, Sansone 2012: 12) is significant as it associates the author with nostalgia about her childhood and, at the same time, with the Central European or Austro-Hungarian culinary heritage. Anthropological studies confirm that *palachinche* are an indicator of nostalgia for the Habsburg Empire, which is especially strong in 21st century Trieste (Ličen 2018: 44, 47).

13. <https://www.forumtomizza.com/hr/fulvio-tomizza/229/> (05.06.2018); <https://www.forumtomizza.com/hr/forum-tomizza-malo-povijesti/188/> (05.06.2018).

Among the many novels dedicated to the “exodus” and its consequences, those that have been translated are the ones that can go beyond national barriers in Istria and open the eyes to the audience “from the other side.” To be translated, the book must be written in a way that is acceptable to its potential audience. Such, for example, are the novels of Croatian Istrian Italians Nelida Milani Kruljac, translated into Croatian and Slovenian (2011, 2015), and Claudio Ugussi, translated into Croatian (Ugussi 2002; 2005). They speak of deep uncertainties marking the time of fascism, WW II and the “exodus,” about fragmented and divided communities, loss of language, silenced and traumatic memories, hybrid identities, etc.<sup>14</sup> A comparable author from Slovenia, Franco Juri, a former international politician and activist, now director of the museum in Piran, is admired within the Italian community, according to my Italian informant, because he “has surpassed all these [national] boundaries” and along with some other people “they left the minority by declaring, away the minority: I’m not the minority!”. His personal story in the form of a novel also exists in Slovenian translation and describes the difficulties of Italians remaining in Istria after the “exodus” and the immigration of newcomers from the former Yugoslavia, a situation where children played “in different languages of this new Babylon: in Slovenian, Italian, Veneto-Istrian, Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian, Albanian... (Juri 2010: 164–165).” Also, worth mentioning is his critical thought on the border, which

brings form and order, defines and gives meaning, while infinity overflows forms, is unapproved, arouses fear, and is a kingdom of the unknown, barbaric. [...] We dismantle them [Istria and Bosnia] with borders, because new borders have their own significance, they increase and produce differences. Because differences serve power [...].

(Juri 2010: 205–206)

Another novel “from the other side,” which shows the “Istrian exodus” from a perspective contrary to the dominant Yugoslavian collective memory version, i.e. as voluntary migrations or emigrations of fascists (Hrobat Virloget 2015a), was written in the Croatian-Veneto-Istrian Istrian dialect (therefore difficult to read for people from outside the region) by the Istrian Croatian novelist Milan Rakovac (1983). Rakovac was born into an anti-fascist family with an Italianised name during the time of “civilizing the Slavs” by means of fascist politics (Baskar 2002; Ballinger 2003). His

14. <https://4d.rtvsllo.si/arhiv/punto-e-a-capo/174465868> (11.06.2018); <http://www.editfiume.info/archivio/lavoce/2012/121217/cultura.htm> (11.06.2018); <http://durieux.hr/wordpress/knjige/proza/podijeljeni-grad/> (11.06.2018).

family was forced to flee from fascist oppression in Istria to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In his words he has written this book to reveal that

“in Istria, the Italians suffered a terrible revenge and punishment. The punishment was merciless. [...] Just like victory, the punishment is deeply rooted in history.” During the interview he refers to the most common complaint of Slovenes and Croats: “the only collective crime of the WW II, which has not been penalized, is Italian fascism [...]. Italians have not paid for their crimes. That is why amnesia occurred”

(Hladnik-Milharčič 2008)

After translating Tomizza’s book (1984) that portrayed the Istrian reality of changing states, the voluntary and forced migrations, Rakovac felt the need for “Southern Slaves to show themselves as noble and open-minded and show repentance, just like Tomizza (Hladnik-Milharčič 2008),” and subjected the collective memory to a critical self-reflection.

The musical theatre performance *Magazzino 18* (2013) by Simone Cristichi, an Italian artist based in Rome, was criticised as lacking any self-reflection on the national level. Nevertheless, it was accepted with enthusiastic standing ovations by the remaining Istrian Italians. By identifying with the artist’s version of the “exodus” and by experiencing a public acknowledgment of their sufferings, officially recognized in Italy, they experienced a kind of catharsis. Personal impressions published in the local Italian newspaper in Piran emphasise feelings of finally being remembered after decades of silences, “without forgetting anybody, neither esuli or the rimasti (remaining),” by linking the exodus “with our most painful memory”, “dismembering of families [...], confronting the contradicting interpretations of facts advocated by opposing political factions and contradicting nationalisms of which we ourselves, the remaining, felt the weight” (Knez 2013: 1013). In an Italian newspaper the narrative was perceived as “very correct” and this is also supposed to be recognised by the Slovenian majority (Knez 2013: 11-12), due to at least a mention of the period of Italian fascism, which is usually omitted in official Italian discourse as the Eastern border history starts with the “Italian exodus” (Fikfak, 2009: 358-359). The Italian historian Piero Purini wrote a solid and well-supported critique of the performance, arguing that the spectacle trivialises the very complex history of complex ethnic-linguistic-national identities by re-perpetuating “an enormous amnesia” corresponding to “the myth of *Italiani brava gente*” which “makes us close our eyes on too many things, first of all on our racism.” He criticises the lack of any historical

contextualisation of the “exodus” by omitting decades of fascistic atrocities affecting the Slavs, severe WW II crimes including the burning of villages, concentration camps, killing of hostages etc., the simplified reasons for the “exodus” were reduced exclusively to ethnic ones ignoring the economical, ideological, social contexts, etc., in short, an overall historical ignorance of the narrative from the scope of the dominant Italian discourse affected by significant collective amnesias (Purrini and Wu Ming 2014; see Purini 2013).

On the Slovenian side an attempt to raise awareness about the “exodus” from an artistic point of view was made by the filmmaker and novelist Goran Vojnović with the motion picture *Piran-Pirano* (2010). The film did not trigger any self-reflection on a national level concerning the drastic (ethnic, social) changes of the (mostly) Istrian urban population after the “exodus.” The author intertwined stories of two inhabitants of Piran, an Italian-speaking *esule* and a post-war Bosnian immigrant, who never took a swim in the “domestic” sea of Piran. The immigrant’s story reflects a rather unpleasant situation of the current majority in Istrian coastal towns, the working class of the former Yugoslavia, who even half a century later did not fully adapt to life in the urban Mediterranean environment (Hrobat Virloget, Poljak Istenič, Čebon Lipovec and Habinc 2016: 80).

Some public performances, story-telling events, were organised recently at the Museum of Koper (2012, 2013) with the aim of finding common memory points of divided communities. On one side, the events brought to light some conflicts that occurred between the post-war Slovenian newcomers and the remaining Italian-speaking community, while on the other hand, they managed to surmount some ethnic divisions and conflicting memories (Čebon Lipovec 2015). Once again, these events were mostly attended by Slovenes and Italians, while the voice of majority of working-class inhabitants from the former republics of Yugoslavia, other than Slovenia, was absent. They were present (at least, at events connected to their workplace-factory, port), but they did not speak up.

Another step towards a mutual understanding of history are the recollections, selected life-stories of the inhabitants of Piran and Koper, mostly “average” people, “locals” and immigrants of different ethnicities who narrate their experiences of being or becoming an Istrian (Pahor 2007, 2011, 2014; Menih 2011).

### **Conclusion: Towards a shared memory?**

In present-day northern Istria, we are dealing with several conflicting memories, which could be briefly categorised into: those of the Italian minority remaining after the exodus that can be further divided into the “autochthonous” population and immigrants from Croatia or Italy, those of Italians, Slovenes or Croatians from inter-ethnic families, immigrants from local environments (Slovenes and Croatian) used to living with Italians (also those “returning“ after having escaped fascist violence) and other immigrants from continental Slovenia, former Yugoslavia, etc., and also with respect to differences in ideology, social class, generations, etc. This is a case of a truly troublesome and complex history and society, where every loudly pronounced word, thought, hypothesis immediately acquires enormous weight and gets critically evaluated from many different perspectives.

I have presented some attempts from the world of politics and art aimed at a critical self-reflection over a divided contested past, which has often been instrumentalised and reinterpreted according to the current needs, as well as silenced and simplified within the dominant national, regional, ideological or other discourses. As an ethnologist trying to grasp what, for a long time, has been part of a collective amnesia or misinterpretations in my own national discourse, dealing with the sentiments of people, I find it extremely difficult to say anything that would not hurt or that would be true for all... The problem derives from my position as an ethnologist as well. On one hand I feel like an “external observer” as I come from the neighbouring region (with a similar history concerning Italians and fascism) but at the same time, I am a part of this community due to my wider regional (and national) identity, my workplace in Koper and my commitment to do more ethnographic work with the people I interviewed, who are interested in the results of my professional research based on their input. I have an unmanageable task of studying a complex multicultural (artificial to some, real to others) society with a difficult contested past, in some cases characterised by a more or less respectful cohabitation, in others a society where the roles of the oppressors and the oppressed have been overturned, where some still feel marginalised, silenced, traumatised and find others ignorant... Besides many attempts to raise awareness of these delicate issues and encourage different groups to listen to each other, I find the present-day Istrian society to be a complex mix of, more or less, “strangers either way” (Čapo Žmegač 2007) and “foreigners at home” (Hrobat Virloget, Gousseff, Corni 2015), though neither of these would hold for certain and be “true”

for all... I do not think that any kind of peace-making memories could satisfy all of the different, often conflicting needs. Time and again, the usual answer to any such attempt or to my investigations would be: "you do not know our history" (van der Port 1999: 14).



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