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# Slovenes and Italians Living in the Karst Area of Italy: Stories, Conflicts, Ignorance and Perceptions

## Abstract

The paper presents the research conducted within the project Ethnography of Silence(s), focusing on the Slovene/Yugoslav-Italian border region established after the Second World War. This politically charged period was marked by ideological tensions, state negotiations, and shifting boundaries that deeply affected local communities. The study examines how individuals from Slovene and Italian communities experienced, interpreted, and adapted to these imposed conditions of coexistence and division. Emphasis is placed on lived experiences shaped by migration, deprivation, and contestation. Employing oral history methodology, the research analyses personal narratives, emotions, and memories as key sources of ethnographic insight. By foregrounding silenced or marginalised voices, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how political borders are internalised and negotiated through everyday life.

## Keywords

Slovene/Yugoslav-Italian border area, contested space, memory, life stories, silence

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*“Because the past is a dark, distorted mirror. You look at it, you only see your own pain. There is no room in there for someone else’s pain.”*

»Ker je preteklost temno, popačeno ogledalo. Če pogledaš vanj, vidiš samo svojo bolečino. V njem ni prostora za bolečino koga drugega.«<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

History is complex, often difficult to understand, and never entirely objective, as it is both produced and interpreted by people. One of its key characteristics is the heterogeneity of interpretations of the past. This is especially evident in contested border regions, where historical events are viewed from different, often opposing perspectives. In such cases, interpretations are frequently one-sided, shaped by political, nationalistic, or social viewpoints. Although historians are expected to analyse rather than judge, they frequently do so, particularly when political issues are at the forefront. Recognising that complete objectivity is unattainable, historians (should) acknowledge their own limitations. No historical account can ever be fully comprehensive, as it is constrained by available sources and by personal limitations such as language proficiency. Given these challenges, historical research remains an ongoing and never fully conclusive endeavour.

With this brief reflection, I wish to emphasise that this paper is not definitive but rather aims to present the research undertaken within the project Ethnography of Silence(s).<sup>2</sup> This project explores various forms of silence, examining their significance and implications. In this paper, the focus is on the border area between Slovenia (Yugoslavia) and Italy, established in the aftermath of the Second World War. This period, especially the first post-war decades, was marked by intense political confrontations and negotiations, not only between two states but also between two opposite political stands. While this topic has been extensively studied in historical research, scholars from both countries have often approached it from a national perspective, frequently overlooking the viewpoints of the other side. However, in recent years and decades, historians and other scholars have adopted a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to the issue (e.g., Altin 2024, Cattunar 2012; 2014; D’Alessio 2006; Orlić 2023; Rolandi 2014; Tenca Montini 2023, and others). A significant contribution in this direction was made by ethnologists Jasna Fakin and Katja Jerman who, in 2004, presented the results of their fieldwork conducted among refugees from Istria and examined the reactions of the local population to the newcomers in their community (Fakin & Jerman 2004).

Still, historical research – despite employing various methodological approaches – rarely addresses silence. Therefore, this paper seeks to shift the research focus from events to individuals, particularly those living in areas marked by migration, deprivation, and appropriation, as well as by coexistence and conflict, communication, and ignorance. This research seeks to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the difficult post-Second World War circumstances in the contested border region, moving beyond one-sided interpretation. It takes into account diverse, often opposing viewpoints and conflicting memories. As explained by Hrobat Virloget: "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" (Hrobat Virloget 2025, 189). The focus is on the impact of political changes on populations affected by war, particularly the consequences of newly established or altered borders, new political regimes and powers, migration, and life in the new communities. The central question is how immigration shaped the lives of people who left their homes, while also addressing the experiences of the so-called old communities already living in these areas. These political transformations deeply influenced individuals and communities, demanding adaptation to new realities.

Geographically, the study focuses on the Italian side of the newly established Yugoslav-Italian border after the end of the Second World War, namely the villages of the Karst area, predominantly populated by the Slovene national community. In April 2024, together with Professors Katja Hrobat Virloget<sup>3</sup> and Martina Tonet and a group of students, we conducted fieldwork in the Italian village of Prosecco/Prosek<sup>4</sup> and its surroundings. These territories have historically been – and still are – home to a Slovene-speaking community (national minority). The fieldwork partly focused on Italian emigrants who moved to these villages after leaving their homes when the territory was assigned to Yugoslavia. Most were former inhabitants of Zone B of the Free Territory of Trieste/Trst (FTT), which was officially assigned to Yugoslavia in 1954. The majority of Italian-speaking inhabitants chose to relocate to Italy, a right granted in the international agreements. They were resettled in various *campi profughi* (refugee camps) in Trieste/Trst and surrounding villages. In many cases, they were placed in areas where the Slovene-speaking population formed the majority. The Slovenes thus represent the other key focus of our research. The intent was not to analyse political strategies or abuses, but rather to explore everyday life and the possibilities for communication and cooperation between these communities.

## 2. Methodology

The central methodological approach of this research consists of semi-structured oral history interviews.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, interviews from previous research were included if they addressed topics relevant to this study. The research involved multiple generations – those who directly experienced and lived through traumatic events such as emigration and resettlement, as well as younger generations who did not witness these events firsthand but inherited an awareness of the period through parents, grandparents, or other relatives. Interviewing several generations offers a broader understanding of post-war life in the border region, revealing diverse perspectives. As the Slovene anthropologist Polona Sitar noted, such an approach allows us to see “through a generational perspective, which, on the one hand, illuminates possible generational discontinuities, and on the other hand, also common understandings” (Sitar 2021, 146).

Our main interlocutors were people who had emigrated or who had already been living on the Italian side of the new border. We were particularly interested in their personal experiences, emotions, and feelings as they faced this new reality. For Italians who left Istria and their homes, the journey into the unknown was a deeply traumatic experience, often perceived as forced emigration. In the places, villages or towns where they were born, a new and different state had been established. The border had shifted, and Yugoslavia became the new reality in those territories. For Slovenes who were already living in Italy, in the villages where emigrants and refugees were resettled, the experience was different. As members of a national minority, they felt the impact of the arrival of Italian settlers in their communities. The life stories and personal perspectives of those placed in refugee camps in Slovene-speaking villages in Italy, and who later built their lives there, form one part of the material analysed in this study. Additionally, we spoke with Slovenes from these villages about their experiences with the settlement of Italian emigrants from Yugoslavia, primarily from Istria. The aim is to give voice to both communities. Attention is dedicated to the interlocutors’ understandings, emotions, and memories.

The period and territory under study represent a challenging historical moment, shaped by political confrontations and negotiations not only between two states and two nations, but also between two opposing political ideologies, all of which had a profound impact on people’s everyday lives. The central question is whether – and how – members of the Slovene and Italian communities managed to adapt to the living

conditions imposed by political decisions. Their life stories and personal perspectives form the core of this study.

### 3. Border Disputes between Yugoslavia and Italy

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As a historian, I cannot entirely step outside my comfort zone, so I will begin by briefly discussing the historical circumstances and developments that led to the formation or invention of national affiliation and awareness in the Upper Adriatic region. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ideas surrounding the concept of nation significantly shaped society. With the rise of national ideologies and the revolutionary movement known as the springtime of nations, the valorisation and affirmation of group identity came to the forefront of political agendas and the creation of nation-states became a central goal. In ethnically mixed territories, however, drawing clear boundaries was challenging. As argued by the historian Vanni D'Alessio (speaking specifically about national statistics but in a way that remains highly relevant): "studying ethnic and national affiliations in multilingual settings, is that there is not, and never was, such thing as fixed identities. Identities are volatile and dependant on time and circumstances, self-ascription and attribution by others" (D'Alessio 2006, 27).

To better understand the complex situation between Yugoslavia and Italy in the years following the end of the Second World War, as well as the causes behind such significant population shifts, an explanation of the border-creation process is necessary. The border issue in the region has a long history. After the First World War, the region of the former Austrian Littoral<sup>6</sup> (Austro-Hungary), also known by its Italian name Venezia Giulia (first mentioned in 1863), became the subject of political negotiations. As Italy had been actively involved in the war and stood on the winning side, the territories promised in the London Pact of 1915 were assigned to it after diplomatic negotiations with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (also allies). The region formally became part of Italy in 1920 with the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo. The Italian fascist regime, established in 1922, then had a strong impact on this territory (Kavrečić Božeglav 2024), due to the systematic process of denationalisation targeting Slovene and Croatian communities.

After the end of the Second World War, the geopolitical reality and relations in the region underwent significant changes and the balance of power shifted. The situation became particularly complex as the newly established Yugoslav state called for a revision of the border between Yugoslavia and Italy. Due to the contentious nature of this issue,

long diplomatic discussion took place. A provisional border demarcation known as the Morgan Line was established in the region of the Julian March. This line marked the boundary between two military administrations: the Yugoslav administration in the east (Zone B) and the Allied Military Government in the west (Zone A). The border issue was partially resolved in 1947 with the Peace Treaty of Paris, which introduced “the possibility of opting ... granted to all those who had permanent residence in the territory assigned to Yugoslavia before 10 June 1940, and whose ‘spoken language’ was Italian” (Volk 2003b, 134; see also Volk 2003a).

The Treaty established the border between Italy and Yugoslavia in the northern sections of the contested territory, as well as the border between Yugoslavia, Italy, and the Free Territory of Trieste/Trst (Treaty of Peace with Italy, 1950), which was created as a new independent entity. This territory was divided into two administrative zones, similarly as the Julian March: Zone A, under the Allied Military Government, and Zone B, under the Yugoslav Military Government. In 1954, with the signing of the London Memorandum, both military administrations transferred their mandates to the governments of Italy and Yugoslavia (Troha 2018).<sup>7</sup> The border question between the two countries was only finally settled in legal terms in 1975 with the Osimo Agreements.

The saying paper endures everything is particularly relevant in this context. One side of history is the official, written version, documented through treaties and agreements that formally established the border between the two states. The other side, however, is the lived experiences of people affected by these decisions. As Mateja Gomboc writes in her novel Gorica (Gomboc 2023), borders divide and bring significant, often severe changes, separating families, friends, and lovers. Similar situations can be observed in other border regions. In the case of Istria, relations between the Italian, Slovene, and Croatian communities were profoundly affected by repression, violence, and resistance. The collapse of the fascist regime in 1943, followed by German occupation until 1945 and the arrival of the Yugoslav (military) authorities, created a highly complex and tense environment. These political shifts, along with the redistribution of power, ultimately led to a mass exodus from the region, primarily of the Italian-speaking population. The Yugoslav authorities were well aware that the majority of the Italian population opposed their rule. They even acknowledged this when the signature-collection campaign for annexation to Yugoslavia, held in Piran/Pirano and Koper/Capodistria in August and September 1945, resulted in a complete failure. “Virtually no one signed, not even party members,” reported Boris

Kraigher to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia (Troha 1999, 267). While the Yugoslav authorities did not restrict Italian emigration, Italy (and the Allied forces in the Julian March) also encouraged it, using it as a means to highlight the perceived harshness of the communist regime.

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**Figure 1: Division of the zones of the Julian March**



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Source: US Bureau of Public Affairs, part of the US Department of State (1957).

Nonetheless, due to the high number of people leaving Zone B, which was later assigned to Yugoslavia, the resettlement of emigrants/refugees represented a great challenge. As observed by the historian Sandi Volk,

the issue was complicated and demanding: while the Anglo-Americans welcomed the *optanti/esuli*/emigrants/refugees as a justification for seizing power in the military zone, they faced a far more challenging reality when confronted with the practical issue of their presence in the territory under their administration (Volk 2003, 132).

The planned settlement in the Trieste/Trst area was of strategic importance for the Italian side, especially for the local pro-Italian organisations and the centre-right component of the Italian government in Trieste/Trst. They assigned the *esuli*

a significant role in the efforts of the Italian side to retain as much of the Julian March as possible within its borders ... the presence of these people, who were presumed to be loyal to Italy, was of great importance in justifying and strengthening Italian claims over Trieste, as well as over Istria (Volk 2003b, 132).

Migration flows were initially directed toward Trieste/Trst and its surroundings. Organising accommodation proved challenging. One temporary solution was the establishment of refugee camps. As explained by Orlić:

once they had crossed the border, the refugees were welcomed into various camps set up also for other war victims, and from there, over the years, they were relocated to facilities specially created throughout Italy. Those who had relatives, friends, or even mere acquaintances in Italy often ended up relying on them, later seeking independent accommodation (Orlić 2023, 176).

### 3.1 Migrations in Numbers

A reliable assessment of migration is difficult to make, as illegal movements were also taking place (see also Jovanović 2024). Nevertheless, some data are available. Italians had been leaving the region since the end of the war, but in the Koper/Capodistria area these movements were not as massive until the Trieste/Trst crisis in October 1953. In contrast, emigration was significantly higher from the areas annexed to Croatia in September 1947 (Troha 1999, 267).

From the enclave of the Zone B of the Julian March, Pula/Pola, migrations to Trieste/Trst began in the summer of 1946, with the main wave of immigrants arriving between January and June/July 1947. In May 1948 (continuing until June 1949 and again in late spring 1950), a mass influx of *esuli/optants* from other parts of Istria annexed by Yugoslavia began (Volk 2003b, 134). The status of refugees was often influenced by the political dynamics between the Allied forces and Yugoslavia. Although they were not initially expected to remain in Trieste/Trst, “the Istrian and Dalmatian refugees became politically significant and useful to the Italian government, which took a direct interest in them” (Volk 2003b, 136). According to data provided by the Allied forces in Zone A,

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between 15,000 and 20,000 *optants* and illegal refugees were already living in Zone A by February 1949, while by April 1950 more than 30,000 had arrived in Trieste. Although Zone A was supposed to be only a transit point on their way to Italy, the vast majority of these newcomers expressed a desire and intent to settle there permanently” (Volk 2003b, 134).

According to Volk, most of the emigrants/refugees arrived in Zone A by March 1950 and by the end of that year, around 25,000 exiles were living there. In the following year, an additional 5,587 people arrived. They were settled either with relatives or in housing specifically prepared for them by the Italian government. They were granted the permission for permanent residence, and in September 1950 the authorities of Zone A authorised the expropriation of land for the construction of a power line to the fish farm near the Timavo River. Another decree followed in June 1951, allowing further expropriation of land for the expansion of the same fish farm (Volk 2003b, 141).

The data collected by the historian Aleksej Kalc show that in 1945 the population of Zone B of the FTT was 46,350. Of these, 18,500 lived in the towns of Koper/Capodistria, Izola/Isola and Piran/Pirano, while the rest lived in villages in the rural hinterland. The population started to decline in 1949, and in 1956 it stood at 42,000 (Kalc 2019, 149). After the signing of the Memorandum of London in 1954, more than 8,000 people opted for Italian nationality and left in 1955. In the following years, another 2,200 people left. By early 1957, around 24,400<sup>8</sup> people had emigrated from the Slovene coastal region alone – almost 53 percent of the population recorded in the 1945 census (Kalc 2019, 151; Troha 1999, 267).

## 4. From One Side to the Other

The social scientists Ana Kralj and Tanja Rener, in their paper Living on the Border: Three Generations' Biographies, observe:

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The construction of the connotation of boundaries takes place through narratives, stories that provide people with shared experiences, common memories and history, making them feel interconnected. Therefore, narratives should not be understood as mere representation methods, but also as discourses that significantly shape the social practices and everyday lives of people in the way that the boundaries acquire meaning in everyday individual experiences (Kralj & Rener 2019, 4).

Throughout the conducted interviews, I aimed to follow and reflect on this statement. In my previous research on everyday life and survival strategies of the local population in the border area, I focused on the Slovene (Yugoslav) side of the border. I examined the question of continuity in a territory disrupted by a newly imposed state border that abruptly severed long-standing social, economic, cultural, and family ties. As one of my interlocutors explained:

Back then it was one country, there were no barriers, no problems, people would go to Istria to buy goods, and women would go to Trieste to sell things ... people lived side by side ... men went to work ... and then, when they cut all that off ... everything was gone (Interlocutor 1).

The territorial discontinuity brought about by the new border severely affected the local population – not only those who remained in Yugoslavia, but also those who lived in Italy or decided, or attempted, to emigrate westward. Archival documentation reveals striking cases, such as that of Karlo Saina, whose request to opt was definitively rejected in July 1951 with the standard formula applied to all rejected applications: “of Croatian nationality and Croatian as the language of use”. The reasoning states that Karlo had two sisters, Italian citizens who had emigrated from Istria in 1926, but also another sister, two brothers, and his mother – none of whom had opted and resided in Yugoslavia. In her book *Identità di confine*, the historian Mila Orlić shows that families like Karlo’s were extremely numerous, and that most were divided precisely because of the option mechanism: on one side, those who chose to be Italian and took the opportunity to leave Istria for various reasons (mostly social and economic, given the dramatic post-war situation);

on the other side, those who remained in Istria (either by choice or by decision of the authorities in cases where their option was denied), who later followed different paths: nationalisation (either Croatian/Yugoslav or integration into the Italian minority)<sup>9</sup> or national indifference, marked by local or regional loyalties and identities, without excluding the possibility of hybrid or multiple forms (Orlić 2023, 154–155).

The causes of migration were varied, and several scholars have written extensively about them. The available archival sources indicate that in application for opting, “the most commonly cited reasons for emigration were: the intention to join relatives in Trieste/Trst, voluntary emigration, illness or a family member’s illness, family conflicts and tensions, marriage, and emigration to America or Australia”. Political (the new regime), economic (agrarian reforms), social, ethnic and religious reasons were usually not listed in the official applications (Fakin & Jerman 2004, 120–121).

Even so, official documents reflect only one part of the reality. It is understandable that those who applied for the option also sought to avoid political or national controversy in an already tense atmosphere. One interlocutor recalled her aunt’s memories:

She always says that her parents, so, my grandparents, had a very deep sense of what it meant to be Italian. So, they didn’t hesitate. At least in her memory, it was: ‘Let’s go. We can’t stay here, let’s go because...’ and so, in reality, it was seen as, yes, they had to leave everything behind, but maybe for them, since they were still young, it wasn’t such a burden... My mom said, ‘we left’. She also says, ‘in the end, I always ended up in a better place’ (Interlocutor 2).

It is well established that the exodus did not involve only individuals of Italian ethnicity. Slovenes and Croats also left, motivated by a range of factors, including economic and political conditions:

It’s true, however, that at the beginning this *esule* settlement seemed entirely Italian. Over the years, it became clear that there were also families of Slovenes and Croats from Dalmatia. The women, for example, spoke Croatian. My father had two friends he worked with who had Slovene surnames. They, too, left during the exodus (Interlocutor 3).

I have a ... niece, who came during the exodus. She told me that ... her house had also been bombed, and when they had nothing left, her mother took the three children and came here. So, they didn’t come because of some ideology or out of fear of staying in Yugoslavia, but simply because they had nothing (Interlocutor 3).

Nevertheless, leaving one's home, land, and especially family and relatives was hard, and adapting to a new reality posed further challenges. It was even more difficult for those placed in refugee camps. The temporary accommodation for refugees consisted of former Italian, German, and Allied camps, military encampments, former concentration camps and prisoner-of-war camps, barracks, abandoned factories, and even churches. These centres were inadequately equipped, and the living conditions were poor (Orlić 2023, 176–177). Similar conditions were documented in the 2004 fieldwork by Fakin and Jerman (2004, 123). One of my interlocutors (interviewed 20 years later) remembered visiting those camps as a child in the 1950s, when she accompanied her mother bringing (selling) meat to refugees. She recalled a large building, a warehouse, where people lived in rooms, one next to the other, separated mostly by cardboards or canvas:

Mostly there were only rooms, maybe a small stove ... The toilets, sanitary facilities, and kitchens were not there, probably at the end of the hall or somewhere else ... it was a *magazzino* near the sea ... people there didn't look poor or hungry, just sad ... probably because they had to leave their homes back in Koper (Interlocutor 4).

Another interlocutor recalled her aunt's words: "We had a house, we ended up in a barrack, we had no way to keep warm, in any case, life wasn't great ..." She used to cook, and then they would all go wash the pots together (Interlocutor 2). Another interlocutor remembered his own experience:

We were living with our parents, who had also come from Istria, in something like a stable, or something like that ... A bed for one and a half people. They had given us some camp cots with straw mattresses. There was a cast-iron stove, and then we'd go to collect pinecones in the woods to keep warm (Interlocutor 6).

The recollections indicate that people were well aware of the harsh living conditions in the camps. One interlocutor from previous research recalled that his wife had been eager to leave, and after they had sold their livestock, they were prepared to depart. However, upon seeing the poor conditions in the barracks "on the other side of the hill" [they lived very close to the border zones, note by author], he decided to remain. He subsequently repurchased the animals and continued living in Yugoslavia.

So, the shack was made up of a single room, maybe one or two meters wide and about five meters long. And then we'd use cardboard to divide it and make a bedroom ... We used to go over to the washtubs. We'd get water there too. We'd go with a bucket to fetch water, and then there were the toilets, and you'd wash yourself under the tap (Interlocutor 6).

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Some camps did not have kitchens, and food was delivered to the refugees: "They would bring food in big pots, and we would line up. Everyone in line, and they'd give us something to eat" (Interlocutor 6).

The harsh conditions were also acknowledged by the Slovene inhabitants of the surrounding villages, though often accompanied by a bitter sense of injustice regarding their own circumstances.<sup>10</sup> An interlocutor interviewed by our students pointed out:

And they also came, I think, looking for better living conditions. The first years in the refugee camps were probably hard, it certainly wasn't pleasant, you know. But later, with all those settlements – which, as you know, were deliberately created – life improved a lot for them, as you know. Those settlements in Slovene areas really improved their lives, I think. As I mentioned before, they probably had more advantages than we did at that time, especially regarding housing conditions and also jobs, you know (Interlocutor 7).

Some people and families stayed in the *campi profughi* for years, even a decade. The number of camps gradually decreased over the years as new houses or other placements (e. g. with relatives) were arranged. According to Orlić, "by the end of 1952, only 42 remained in operation, housing around 30,000 people" (Orlić 2023, 176–177). However, due to the harsh living conditions, some even decided to move back to Yugoslavia.

## 5. Parallel Universes

During the research and conversations with our interlocutors, several recurring issues emerged. Both the Slovene and Italian communities stressed that, even if they live in the same village, they did (or do) not truly coexist or cohabit. When interlocutors spoke about their life stories, the impression was that in the small village of Prosecco/Prosek,<sup>11</sup> two parallel universes existed.<sup>12</sup> People lived in physical proximity yet remained mentally distant. On one side were Italians and their experiences, and on the other Slovenes and theirs. In the period following the exodus from Istria, communication between refugees and Slovenes was minimal.

As explained by Fakin and Jerman, the refugees were often placed in territories inhabited by the Slovene community: "In the municipalities of Duino-Aurisina, Trieste, and Opicina, Istrian refugees were accommodated by private individuals, in camps in Padriciano and Opicina, and in barrack settlements established on the outskirts of Slovene villages on the Karst Plateau near Trieste" (Fakin & Jerman 2004, 125). In the period of the FTT (1947–1954), the president of Zone A, Gino Palutan, was responsible for allocating funds provided by the Italian government for the construction of temporary and permanent housing for exiles. He was the key figure in implementing the resettlement plan until 1952. In Santa Croce/Križ, he had 33 temporary housing units built in barracks on rented land. In Trieste/Trst, between Servola/Škedenj and Ponziana/Pončana, he oversaw the construction of 40 temporary and permanent housing units, as well as the already mentioned 20 housing units in the fish-farm area at the mouth of the Timavo River. His goal was "to settle the Istrian exiles in suburban areas to defend Italian identity" (Volk 2003b, 140–141). Hrobat Virloget similarly observes an

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 ... 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 (Hrobat Virloget 2025, 195).

During an interview with a descendant of a refugee from Istria, born in 1973, we spoke about her father's experience as an *esule* from Pula/Pola (today in Croatia). She could not say much about his experiences, as her father rarely spoke about his past and childhood. She knew only that when he and his family left Istria, he was still a child. They were placed in a *campo profughi* around 1950 in Santa Croce/Križ, a village near Prosecco/Prosek. She decided to call her father, and the interview continued. He recalled mingling with other children from Istria and having several fights with the Slovenes. They felt like *intrusi*, intruders, since people from the village used to throw stones at the barracks in the camp:

The contact between the two communities was minimal ... this was at the beginning, slowly the situation improved and today we are all the same ... back then we had separate schools ... today some send their children to Slovene schools, back then it was unthinkable ... (Interlocutor 5 and 6).<sup>13</sup>

Other interlocutors also described the situation as being characterised by very limited contact, often accompanied by a lack of appreciation for one another. Interestingly, they noted that the situation has changed and that relations have improved. On the other side, the Slovene community held a different perspective. They experienced the arrival of the Istrians as “a great injustice and a shock” (Interlocutor 8), a sentiment that persists even among younger generations.

During the first years in the barracks, refugees were given clothing and food,<sup>14</sup> though they had to wait in line. As already mentioned, the rooms were divided with cardboard, and the lavatories were in separate spaces: “We went there to get water. With a bucket you would go and get water and after that there were toilets and you would wash at the sink ...”. However, he also remembers those years from a child’s point of view: “A child, I think, does not experience that trauma. He always finds an opportunity to enjoy himself” (Interlocutor 6).

No, but I don’t think anyone my age held a grudge because we didn’t live it. I think resentment may remain among those who were adults at the time, but those people are now almost all gone. Seventy years have passed (Interlocutor 6).

A similar feeling emerged in another interview conducted several years ago. As part of research on the attacks and burning of occupied territories during the Second World War in what is today western Slovenia, interlocutors recounted their experiences. The events were devastating: the burning of homes and the struggle for survival left deep scars. Yet some, who were children at the time, also remembered small moments of wonder, such as sleeping outside and watching the stars.

Reactions to the refugees varied not only among the Slovene community but also within the Italian community:

They lived in terrible misery, however, people saw them ... they were treated badly, they were considered privileged by Slovenes because Slovenes had also lived through 20 years of fascism, but also by Italians, by people from Trieste ... it is also understandable, I don’t deny it. If a citizen of Trieste is looking for a job and I, because I am a refugee, have a few more points, it’s understandable; however, one has to understand that we did not choose it, it was political ... (Interlocutor 6).

A member of the Slovene national minority in Prosecco/Prosek explained his experience with the arrival of the Istrian refugees:

... after the war, when the *Istriani* came ... I was a kid ... when they settled and built a new village on the hill, they called it Borgo San Nazario ... first they placed them in the barracks, the Americans built them ... and there was also a shop there, a church ... and the people lived in those barracks. They had everything, light, carbon, wood, places to wash ... they did not even want to leave from there ... the state built apartments for them in Borgo San Nazario ... they had everything, didn't pay for anything, they were even given money ... (Interlocutor 9).

This reflection shows a different perspective and memory of the events, stated by Hrobat Virloget (2025, 188) as “conflicting memories along the former Yugoslav-Italian border, where the events throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century have left a difficult, contested legacy – a common unifying and at the same time divisive intangible memorial heritage.” One interlocutor recalled:

Those Istrians, when they came, we had some contacts, joined some of our societies, but not at the beginning ... later, yes, to meet some girls ... I have a friend who married an Italian girl, they put their child in Slovene school, but she always speaks only Italian ... the problem is that those who are born here, they don't learn Slovene ... they don't want to ... that is politics ... they are still refugees ... when you go to an office to ask for a job, they ask you who you are, and if you say you were born in Istria ... you get two more points ... they have, still today, an advantage in getting a job ... for the church, it was divided, too, they didn't mix with us ... in Borgo San Nazario there were pastures ... also in private hands, the state took them and gave them some compensation ... my kids didn't have contacts ... those who came, I think, were not all Italian speaking, but here only Italian ... the state gave them help, for school, clothing, house, work ... they were sad, because they had to leave everything they had ... but they were not rich back home either ... they all got jobs and ours didn't ... this is still painful ... it was the situation, politics, they were not guilty, the people ... (Interlocutor 9).

Another interlocutor commented on the time when the new settlers arrived:

... they didn't welcome them [the refugees, note by author] well, because they felt they would take something from them ... those, our *Ištrijani* up in Prosek [probably referring to the land where Borgo San Nazario for the *esuli* was built] ... they settled on the land of our ancestors ... personally, I have no contact with them ... they stay up there, and we are here in the centre of the village ... there is a lot ... I'm not saying fascist, but they don't like us and we don't like them (Interlocutor 11).

This is the comment of a young woman in her mid-twenties. She also said: "We are a very close community [referring to the Slovene community, note by author] ... we like to stick together among ourselves ..." (Interlocutor 11). The question here is whether this reflects a form of precautionary behaviour.

The Slovene community often held a strong sense of resentment toward the refugees due to the status they acquired in Italy. They were perceived as privileged – not only by Slovenes but by Italians as well, as already mentioned by another refugee (Interlocutor 6). An interlocutor from the Slovene community explained her father's experience:

But they also had certain privileges, you know. For example, in my own family there was the case of my father. My father applied to work for the railway ... he passed it [competition, note by author], but the scoring system worked in such a way that whoever was a refugee automatically got extra points. And all those who had those extra points stayed in Trieste. And my father, because of that, had to go and work in Milan for eight years ... (Interlocutor 7).

It is evident that in everyday life, experiences and perceptions of inequality among people and communities were present and were transmitted to subsequent generations. Another interlocutor from the Slovene community recalled an example:

I actually remember another case, but not here in the village. It was about another person who said that when she was little ... she belonged to the Slovene community ... she said that when they were little they didn't live in abundance. And then, seeing someone from outside being given a house, already having a television when you yourself didn't even have one at home, or other things that at the time were considered almost luxuries ... of course they experienced that as something negative ... But yes, let's say that sometimes people do look down on each other and so on (Interlocutor 12).

A younger interlocutor (born in 1985) also noted the distance:

I had an experience when I was coaching volleyball ... there was the Slovene and another, the Italian girls' team ... about 10 or 15 years ago (so around 2010) ... most of those girls (Italian), some of them didn't even know we existed ... they didn't even know [referring to the *esuli* when arriving to Prosek, note by author] that they had moved to a village where Slovenes lived ... this is why I said we don't coexist ... they are two different worlds ... separate communities ... (Interlocutor 10).

She also recalled the division in kindergarten (and later in schools): "It was the same building, the Slovene kindergarten was downstairs, and the Italian on the first floor ... we didn't even stay in the courtyard at the same time ..." (Interlocutor 10). Another interlocutor, whose mother was from the Italian community, also mentioned the distance:

My mother, who went to school here in Prosek, attended the Italian section. In the same building there were both the Slovene and the Italian schools, and she told me how she never had any contact with the Slovene section. So, and now we're talking about the late Seventies, roughly, yes, something like that. And at that time ... there probably wasn't any contact (Interlocutor 12).

When asked whether Italians knew anything about the stories or experiences of the Slovenes, she replied: "No, and they are not interested in them ... you live here fifty years and you could at least learn how to say *dober dan* [referring to the Slovene expression Good day, when you enter a bakery owned by Slovenes] ...". She mentioned some collaboration in associations (such as sports); however, she pointed out that a certain distance remains, maybe even caused by Slovenes themselves, who are "establishing a distance again" (Interlocutor 10).

## 6. Conclusion

As explained by the anthropologist Hrobat Virloget (2025, 190), "this border situation on the micro level ... is a mirror of the difficult relationship between Slovenian and Italian national narratives of history on the macro level".

The aim of this paper was to open several research questions that will be explored further. These initial interviews give us a brief insight into the other side of history, one not characterised by political issues (border disputes, opposing political regimes, national conflicts) but by everyday life in the borderland area. The purpose was to consider different aspects, experiences, and perspectives. Our interlocutors come from different ethnic/national backgrounds. Only through such an inclusive approach can a more comprehensive understanding of difficult and traumatic events be achieved. It is important to remember that no person is an island and that we cannot fully understand relations, stories, conflicts, and perceptions if we do not consider the wider context. The world, I believe, is not black and white, and neither are human stories and histories.

Let me conclude this paper with the reflections of interlocutors from the Slovene (one with an Italian mother) and from the Italian community, interviewed by our students:

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It's just that ... how should I put it? One truth doesn't cancel out another. Because if you've suffered, that doesn't mean that I haven't suffered too. And admitting certain things doesn't mean that an injustice was or wasn't done to you (Interlocutor 12).

On the neighbouring street in our village there lived an Italian family. I don't know if they were *esuli* or not, but they were my age – the same age as my brother – I think there were three or four children. And we never had any contact with them. If that family had been Slovene, that girl would have been my best friend. I always found that absurd. But yes, circumstances led to us not to socialise. So, I would say that I don't know those stories (Interlocutor 13).

There are barriers to be knocked down, yes. You have to understand what one half went through and the other half went through as well. Certainly, it wasn't easy to see outsiders arriving and occupying land that had been theirs all along – of their grandparents, parents, families. Definitely, it was difficult, I understand that, however, you have to understand what the others experienced. It's not as if they came here on vacation by choice. Desperation led them to make this choice. They lived in these not very good conditions. They also suffered. In my opinion, you have to try to go deeper on both sides. Try to understand, to open up (Interlocutor 5).

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Interlocutor 2, 1977

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Interlocutor 5, 1973  
Interlocutor 6, 1946  
Interlocutor 7, 1956  
Interlocutor 8, 1982  
Interlocutor 9, 1946  
Interlocutor 10, 1985  
Interlocutor 11, 2001  
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\*All interviewees will remain anonymous. The only piece of information provided is the year of birth.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Citation from the book *The Island of Missing Threes* by Elif Shafak (2022, 112) and translation in Slovene from *Otok pogrešanih dreves* (2025, 108).

<sup>2</sup> Ethnography of Silence(s), J6-50198, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency, project leader Katja Hrobat Virloget, PhD.

<sup>3</sup> See also her other works: A Shared but Divisive Borderland Heritage? Silenced Memories, Suppressed Hybrid Ethnic Identities, and Parallel Worlds on the Slovenian-Italian Border (2025); Silences and Divided Memories: The Exodus and Its Legacy in Post-War Istrian Society (2023).

<sup>4</sup> The names of cities, towns, and villages are given in both Slovene and Italian. When a locality lies within the territory of present-day Italy, the Italian name appears first; if it is located in present-day Slovenia, the Slovene name is given first. When citing interviews, only one name is used.

<sup>5</sup> The field researchers were Katja Hrobat Virloget, Petra Kavrečič Božeglav, Martina Tonet, and their students: Kristina Kovačič, Monika Cergolj, Gaja Grizan, and Nikita Kuster. The research took place between 2 and 5 April 2024. Special thanks go to Sonia Covolo Ciuch for kindly suggesting the interviewees for the research. See also Hrobat Virloget (2025).

<sup>6</sup> The territory included the Margraviate of Istria, Gorizia and Gradisca, and the Imperial Free City of Trieste. “The name Littoral was a ‘strategic’ decision made by Vienna in order to emphasise the role of Trieste as a port city. In fact, only a smaller part of the crown land lay by the sea. The name, translated in Slovene as Avstrijsko primorje, acquired the Slovene identification of the region

as Primorska, which still today refers to the western part of Slovenia. On the other hand, the territory in question also acquired the Italian name Venezia Giulia, used after 1863 by Italian nationalists who considered this territory to be historically Italian" (Kavrečič Božeglav 2023, 93–94).

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<sup>7</sup> For further information about the Slovene/Yugoslav-Italian border and mutual relations, see Kacin-Wohinz & Pirjevec (2000); Marušič (2004); Pirjevec (2008); Pirjevec, Bajc & Klabjan (2005); Pirjevec, Klabjan, Bajc & Darovec (2006); Slovensko-italijanski odnosi 1880-1956 (2004).

<sup>8</sup> According to data provided by Nevenka Troha, the number of legal and illegal emigrants until 1957 from the Koper/Capodistria district was 25,062. From Zone A of the FTT, which was annexed to Yugoslavia/Slovenia (Miljski hribi/Milje Hills), 2,748 people, mostly Slovenes, left. In total, 27,810 individuals left the area that was annexed to Yugoslavia/Slovenia in October 1954 (Troha 1999, 267).

<sup>9</sup> Because of the border changes in the Upper Adriatic Area from 1866 to 1954 (1975), two national minorities are now recognised: the Slovene one in Italy and the Italian one in Slovenia and Croatia.

<sup>10</sup> This was observed throughout our ethnographic field research and also noted in the paper by Hrobat Virloget (2025, 194).

<sup>11</sup> Prosecco/Prosek and Borgo San Nazario are two parts of the village. The latter is the new area, where housing for Italian refugees was built.

<sup>12</sup> This was observed throughout our ethnographic field research and also noted in the paper by Hrobat Virloget (2025). See also her book *Silences and Divided Memories* (2023).

<sup>13</sup> The Interlocutors were partly interviewed at the same time.

<sup>14</sup> "The refugees housed in the 'Reception Centres' were entitled to free accommodation, a daily allowance of 158 lire for each family member, medical and pharmaceutical assistance, the distribution of clothing, and, in exceptional cases, additional supplementary aid. However, those who managed to find employment, even if only temporary, were immediately deprived of the regular allowance, and in many cases benefited only from free accommodation" (Orlić 2023, 177).

## **Slovenci in Italijani, ki živijo na kraškem območju v Italiji: zgodbe, konflikti, nevednost in percepcije**

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### **Izvleček**

Članek predstavlja raziskavo, izvedeno v okviru projekta Etnografija tišin(e), ki se osredotoča na slovensko/jugoslovansko-italijansko obmejno območje, vzpostavljen po drugi svetovni vojni. To politično napeto obdobje so zaznamovale ideološke napetosti, državna pogajanja in spreminjajoče se meje, ki so globoko vplivale na lokalne skupnosti. Študija preučuje, kako so posamezniki iz slovenskih in italijanskih skupnosti doživljali, razlagali in se prilagajali tem vsiljenim pogojem sobivanja in delitve. Poudarek je na življenjskih izkušnjah, ki so jih oblikovali migracije, prikrajšanost in spori. Raziskava z uporabo metodologije ustne zgodovine analizira osebne pripovedi, čustva in spomine kot ključne vire etnografskega vpogleda. S poudarjanjem tihih ali marginaliziranih glasov študija prispeva k razumevanju, kako se politične meje internalizirajo in pogajajo v vsakdanjem življenju.

### **Ključne besede**

slovensko/jugoslovansko-italijansko obmejno območje, sporni prostor, spomin, življenjske zgodbe, tišina