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## WHAT DOES SILENCE TELL? TRAUMAS AND MEMORIAL CONFLICTS IN THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH OF ISTRIAN EXODUS AND A NATIONAL “HERO”

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### ABSTRACT

*The article reflects on the meanings of silence which was encountered in the ethnographic research of memories on the Istrian exodus and a WWII national “hero” in the Primorska (littoral) region of Slovenia. Different kinds of silence are discussed, from the one deriving from the conflict of memories and power relations, violence and fear; to Freudian ideas of repression and trauma, denial and others. From the methodological point of view the question is raised of how to detect silence when filled with words or embodied. A reflection is made on the impact of research on the silenced communities.*

*Keywords: silence, memory conflict, trauma, denial, fear, conspiracy of silence*

## COSA CI RACCONTA IL SILENZIO? TRAUMI E CONFLITTI MEMORIALI NELLA RICERCA ANTROPOLOGICA SULL'ESODO ISTRIANO E SU UN «EROE» NAZIONALE

### SINTESI

*Inizialmente, l'articolo riflette sui significati del silenzio che sono stati incontrati nella ricerca etnografica delle memorie sull'esodo istriano e su un «eroe» nazionale della Seconda Guerra Mondiale nella regione della Primorska (Litorale) della Slovenia. Vengono poi discussi diversi tipi di silenzio, da quello che nasce dal conflitto tra memorie e relazioni di potere, violenza e paura, alle idee freudiane di repressione e trauma, negazione e altro. Dal punto di vista metodologico si pone la questione di come interpretare il silenzio quando è nascosto dietro le parole o incorporato. Infine, viene proposta una riflessione sull'impatto della ricerca sulle comunità silenziate.*

*Parole chiave: silenzio, conflitti di memoria, trauma, negazione, paura, congiura del silenzio*

## INTRODUCTION

Deriving from my ethnographical fieldwork on memories of the Istrian exodus<sup>1</sup> and a controversial national “hero”, the aim of the article is to reflect on the type of silence linked to memory as a common point of interest between history and anthropology. The article sums up some of the already published reflections, including those which due to the Slovenian language, were limited to only a small number of readers (Hrobat Virloget, 2017; Virloget & Logar, 2020; Hrobat Virloget, 2021a),<sup>2</sup> while the parts in English were dispersed among diverse publications (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a, 2021b). The novelty lies in the theoretical and conceptual upgrading and more precise historical frameworks of remembrance and oblivion.

The approach of anthropologists and oral historians to memory is close, but still some differences can be noted. The definition of memory of Halbwachs, the founder of the field of collective memory (Gensburger, 2020, 69), as “the present of the past” is essential to both disciplines, although other, different epistemological traditions are used (P. Nora, P. Ricoeur, J. Assman). According to him all social thinking is memory; it can be the evocation of the past, an effect of the past and effect of the present (Lavabre, 2007, 142). Researchers of oral history and anthropology can also agree with Alessandro Portelli’s reflection that oral sources tell us not only what people did but also what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did (Portelli, 2016). However, reading the works from both disciplines on memory, silence and oblivion, it seems that oral history is focused on the past and narratives about it, while in anthropology it is the individual, society and their emotional aspects in the present that are the forefront of research interest (e.g. Pabst, 2023). While for oral historians it is important to understand the historical context and the changes

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- 1 Despite the different interpellations reflected in the term “exodus” or “post-war migrations” [Or use italics instead of quote marks] (cf. Verginella, 2000; Ballinger, 2003, 42–45; Kacin Wohinz & Troha, 2001; Hrobat Virloget, 2021a), I use the word “exodus”. The Istrian exodus presents the final stage of (mainly) Italian emigration from Yugoslavia, which started shortly after World War II, 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 (Troha, 1997, 59). According to censuses, in the period from 1945 to 1958, 49,132 people left the Slovenian part of the territory, mostly Italians, but also Slovenes and Croats. Of these 27,810 are counted as optants (Volk, 2003, 51; Kosmač, 2017, 193; Kacin Wohinz & Troha, 2001); between 200,000 and the exaggerated 350,000 persons left the whole of Istria (including the Croatian part) (Ballinger, 2003, 1, 275). From the census of 1961, 44% of the resident population before WWII remained in the zones annexed to Yugoslavia (186,450), more than 55% left (232,994) and 144,505 persons arrived. However, their ethnic identification has been recently discussed in the frame of “national indifference”, from hybridity, opportunism, and fluidity to indeterminacy (Orlić, 2023, 167–168).
  - 2 The book is currently in translation to English, expected to be published in 2023 by Berghahn books.

in memorial narratives in relation to identity creations through time, anthropologists are more interested in the relations and effects of memory and silence on the emotional aspects, identification processes and belonging, relations between individuals and diverse social groups (e.g. family, nation, class), power relations, legitimisations in the present, etc. (e.g. Pabst, 2023; Vodopivec, 2008; Dosse, 1993; Crapanzano, 2011; Smith, 2006; Baussant, 2002).

Silence as a research topic was introduced by linguistic studies in the 1970s. It was first set forth in relation to negatively marked absence as indicative of passivity, avoidance, negative emotions, silencing, powerlessness etc. This, together with different aspects of eloquent, communicable silence, was taken up by researchers from other disciplines, such as anthropology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, law and historiography (Marković, 2020, 172–73). The scientific interest in the frame of cultural anthropology and history was first linked to memory studies; recently, studies have been done on Holocaust survivals, intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories, conflict and violence, and nationalisation processes, but also other topics, such as religion (e.g. Kidron, 2009; Straub & Rüssen, 2010; Vinitsky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010; Pabst, 2022; Marković, 2020; Hrobat Virloget & Škrbić Alempijević, 2021; Soler, 2021).

Remembering and forgetting are inseparable and both are selective. An act of remembering involves at the same time selective, partial or other forms of forgetting (Assmann & Shortt, 2012, 5). Silence is much more complex and heterogeneous as its functions and consequences cannot be equalised. “Keeping silent”, “concealing”, and “silencing (oneself)” describe entirely different activities, motives, and intentions (Straub, 2010, 117). My reflection on silence will start with a brief account on a silence encountered in a short ethnographic fieldwork on a controversial national “hero”, while further discussion on the Istrian exodus derives from a much more accurate fieldwork of more than a decade.

## THE SILENCE ABOUT A NATIONAL “HERO”. CONFLICTS OF MEMORY AND IMPOSED SILENCE

The first case discusses a collective silence in the case of the Slovenian national “hero” of World War II (since 1953), Karlo Maslo from the Brkini region. He was a commander of a military troop, battalion and brigade in the National Liberation Struggle. When the idea of erecting a monument to Karlo Maslo was proposed, the municipality of the region of his provenience – Kozina-Hrpelje – after much debate, refused to place it in their area.<sup>3</sup> The bust was eventually placed in Koper/Capodistria in 2010, where the only memory about him is probably linked to the official Slovenian narrative (Hrobat Virloget & Čebren Lipovec, 2017, 60).

3 Besides oral sources, newspaper articles reported on the postponing of the erection of the monument (Primorski dnevnik, 22. 8. 2009: Heroj čaka na spomenik, <https://www.primorski.eu/novice/49739-heroj-aka-na-spomenik-CUPR49774> (last access: 2023-08-22).



When I wanted to find some information on this “hero” in his birth region, and try to understand why the “local” people do not support the official memory of him, I encountered only whispering. When asking my friends to ask their grandfathers about him, I received answers such as: “I hope you haven’t told them that somebody from [...the village] knows about him!”, or: “You are walking on thin ice.” Only horrific fragments were documented, like: “the one who was killing people (after the war) with a pick”, “many people lost their lives because of him for nothing”, “a rapist”, etc. (Hrobat Virloget & Čebren Lipovec, 2017, 55–65). Analogous accounts of multiple rapes and other similar misdeeds are recorded through personal on-line blogs, and even in a published monograph (Perme et al., 2000). A family recounted to me the loss of a family member due to fascist and Nazi revenge for the partisans’ attacks led by the aforementioned “hero”; according to people’s perception, this revenge was the reason for many villagers’ deaths: from revenge. I tried to break locals’ silence by taking my uncle from the region with me on ethnographic field-research to the homes of his friends/colleagues, hoping to get more trust from locals.<sup>4</sup> Yet still, older people who experienced the hero first-hand fell silent as soon as he was mentioned. Only their children, who had heard about his deeds in the privacy of their families, dared to talk about memories of him as an “anti-hero”, a rapist, and a murderer. If I took out my audio-recorder, or even a notebook, everybody went silent. Thus, the only way of getting some information about him was through casual conversations, with no possibilities of recording.

Why such an omnipresent silence? Individual memories that do not conform to the collective view of the past are censored, rejected, stigmatised, or excluded from collective (national) discourse (Halbwachs, 1925; 2001; Assmann, 2007, 16). In the states of Eastern Europe during the Cold War, only the official, “purified” version of the past was communicated; there was no place for reflections on the nation’s own responsibility for acts perpetrated during WWII. The official memory relied on the double role of heroes and victims – anti-fascist heroes, resistance fighters and victims of fascism. The master narratives were dominated by myths of victimhood, heroism, collective resistance against the German occupying fascist forces and the downplaying or ignorance of collaborationism (Karge, 2010). In Tito’s Yugoslavia, all memories which did not conform to the image of partisan heroism were banned in the name of the idea of “Brotherhood and Unity” on which the state was founded. The positive partisan past, creating the perception of WWII as solely a national liberation struggle and socialist revolution, omitting all internal and national conflicts, was a “policy of memory” which legitimated the ruling Communist Party. But the pain of the suppressed memories remained and was evoked in the nationalist discourses of the wars of the 90s (Bet-El, 2004, 211). It has long been thought that the official memory in Yugoslavia was “frozen” until Tito’s death in the 80s, a view which was rejected

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4 It did not help that my family derives from the same region.

by Heike Karge. The enormous self-sponsored local activity in erecting village monuments and organising local commemoration events presented active spaces in the officially allowed “spaces of memory” which, by stressing the message of traditional, dolorous remembrance of the dead (local victims), challenged the two main pillars of the official war narrative: the “socialist revolution” and “brotherhood and unity” (Karge, 2009).

“An amnesia of national experiences” (Judt, 2005, 829) started to be shattered at the end of the 1970s in Western Europe, but in Eastern Europe only after 1989 (Karge, 2010; Berger, 2010), when a new “cleansing of the past” took place (Karge, 2010, 138). After interpretative pluralism was introduced in Slovenia in the 1980s, the interpretations of WWII were purely political and ideological and in diametrical opposition to each other. The idea of national reconciliation of the opposite ideological sides prevailed, where the side that lost the war, burdened with collaboration, strived for their interpretative dominance (Godeša, 2018). Bojan Godeša described the contradictory political evaluations of WWII which continue into the present as “battling myths with myths” (Godeša, 2018, 86).

However, why, so many years after the democratisation of memory narratives, are people still afraid to talk? One reason can be the prevailing perception of the National Liberation Struggle during WWII, of which this national “hero” was a part and which is still considered the foundation of Slovenian identity (Hrobat Virloget & Čebren Lipovec, 2017, 62). In the psychological sense it could be said that people’s silence became a survival strategy and a basis of their identity (Hrobat Virloget, 2021b, 14). Psychotherapists argue that after the war, the official narrative demands only heroic stories to be told. Victims can only speak if the injustice has been unambiguously recognised and named (Erzar, 2017, 31, 85). This has not been the case with the aforementioned national “hero”. Until interpretations of historical events or someone’s vision of the past are acknowledged as falsified constructs, memories concerning them remain suppressed (Althounian, 2005, xiv).

A similar persistent silence, also after the change of socio-political circumstances post 1991, was researched by Urška Lampe in the case of the Borovnica camp in Slovenia, where imprisoned Italians were held after WWII. Memories of it were kept only by the local individuals, upon whom a regime of fear was established. People did not dare to speak about it due to the political pressures and fear of the regime as well as relations among the community (Lampe, 2021, 144–150). The environment of fear and violence can be frequently noted in everyday talk in the Brkini region in comments such as: “it was worse after WWII, than during it” or people from Brkini “had to be careful of what they said [...] because they ended up in jail for every incorrect word” (Hrobat Virloget & Čebren Lipovec, 2017, 60, 62).<sup>5</sup> We can speak about shared fear, anxiety, and thus also silence,

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5 The observation derives also from years of everyday discussions with my family, relatives and others from the Brkini region.

that connect people in a “conspiracy of silence”, where “silence is understood as the denial of voice and where to be silent means to be silenced” (Marković, 2020, 177; Zerubavel, 2006).

Urška Lampe argues that the breaking of an (imposed) collective amnesia does not depend solely on the favourable (changed) socio-political circumstances (Passerini, 2014, 16), but on the desire of the community upon which amnesia was imposed (Lampe, 2021, 151–152). The “public secrecy”, as Urška Lampe calls this silence (Lampe, 2021, 147), in the case of the Brkini “hero”, got its voice in the rebellion against the erection of the monument. As Aleida Assman and Linda Shortt argue, one of the important actors in redefining the past is the generational change. With the transition from one generation to another, shifts in the frame of relevance and references happen. When the younger generation receive a public voice, they can make a rupture in the repressive silence which the older generation had maintained (Assman & Shortt, 2012, 7). The younger generation,<sup>6</sup> which was listening to the contra-memory of their parents in the intimate sphere of their families, was not burdened with the fear of speaking as their parents were; they grew up in an environment of more plural frames of memory and they broke the silence.

#### THE SILENCE ON THE ISTRIAN EXODUS. CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE, TRAUMAS, MEMORY CONFLICTS

If history is a product of power and the ultimate product of power is invisibility (Trouillot, 2015, xxiii), the next study case speaks about invisible memories of the Istrian exodus in the frame of the Yugoslavian, and later Slovenian, dominant narrative (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a).

I interviewed 53 people, from which I have transcripts (made with a dictaphone): 24 Slovenes, 21 Italians, and 8 immigrants from the former Yugoslavia. Four more people were interviewed without a dictaphone/transcripts and 4 thanks to student research; additional information was obtained by everyday (not-recorded) discussions and the method of participant observation (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a).<sup>7</sup> The interlocutors were the current inhabitants of Istria, that is, the Istrians who remained (Slovenes and Italians) and the immigrants during and after the exodus (Italians from Italy and Croatia, Croats, Bosnians, people from Kosovo, Montenegro). I managed to conduct only one very long interview with an

6 Included among them was a person with an important leading function in a local public institution (I do not name him in order to preserve anonymity).

7 In the article I reflect also on additional memories which I have heard in the public presentations of my book (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a) and others collected in the frame of the project *My Story from Silence / Moja zgodba iz tišine* (1. 8. 2022-1. 6. 2023). The methodology in this case was not ethnographic – memories were collected during 5 workshops with three psychotherapists and by written personal memories (the call for proposals “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 organisation PINA).

Italian migrant, the president of an association of *esuli*<sup>8</sup> abroad. He was surprised when he did not manage to convince other Italian *esuli* to speak with me, so I quickly gave up and concentrated only on today's Istrians.

The interviews were conducted in a public space or at the homes of the interlocutors. The main problem was that most of the interviewees, mainly Italians who remained in Istria after the exodus, refused to be interviewed (ca. 70%). In addition, in my encounters with people I felt a discomfort due to something unutterable, something people preferred to avoid, especially Italians. When my friend, a member of the Italian minority, tried to find Italian interlocutors to discuss this subject with me, she was surprised when they all declined, saying that too much time had passed since the exodus. She was never told anything about it nor now they did not want speak. Thus, people refused to talk not only with me, as a researcher not belonging to the Italian community, but also with someone who is “of them”. I felt that one reason for that was my belonging to “the other”, the dominant “nation” from which they did not expect any comprehension. This became clear when after my first interview on the radio about exodus, my interlocutor, a known local Italian politician, called me to congratulate me for my courage. As with most of my interlocutors, he agreed to an interview with me only when his friend assured him that I am “different” – meaning from other Slovenes – because I am comprehending.<sup>9</sup>

Originating from the nearby region, Karst, I could define my ethnographic position according to Pier Paolo Viazzo as neither “native” nor “distant,” a “view from up close” or a “view from the neighborhood” (Baskar, 2014, 438). The few people who had the courage to speak with me, however, found it very difficult to talk about the consequences of the exodus, and for most women the conversation ended in tears. Silence was different for Slovenes from Istria or immigrants from other republics of the former Yugoslavia. When their memories touched the experience of seeing violence against Italians<sup>10</sup> some of them refused to continue, some whispered, especially in public. I also felt that some were relieved they could finally tell somebody their memories. Interesting was the decision by somebody from Macedonia to end the silence and to speak to a researcher. The decision to tell me – in a whisper – about the violence perpetrated on Istrian Italians came from his belief that everyone involved was dead by now, and that the time of the “official memory” (that the interlocutor connects with historians), which differs from its own memory, has passed: “I will say something else, I don’t know if I should... Historians probably won’t take offense, no-one will... Most are already dead...” (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a, 41).

For decades after the exodus, talking about it was taboo, not only in the dominant Yugoslav discourse, but also among the Italians who remained. The “quiet

8 The term by which the Istrian migrants define themselves, meaning “exiled”, “refugees”.

9 Before the radio broadcast.

10 Mostly banging on their doors to make them leave.

detabooization” of the controversial topics of the exodus and the “foibe”<sup>11</sup> did not begin in Yugoslavia until the beginning of the liberalisation of public domain in the 1980s. The regime was slowly losing its grip on historiography, but it was not the historians who were the first to mention this but the writers. The first to speak out were the Italians who stayed in Istria (Dota, 2010, 73–85; Hrobat Virloget, 2021a, 42).

In the interviews with Italian women, unprocessed childhood trauma is what marks memories of the exodus and the humiliation they experienced as Italians, stigmatised in the Yugoslavian discourse due to the collective guilt of fascism and war crimes. An Italian interlocutor told me the story of an Italian lady who in a conversation with Italians during the time of my research (so, decades after Slovenia’s independence) mentioned her school experiences of humiliation from the Yugoslav authorities.<sup>12</sup> Nobody reacted and simply remained silent:

*After hearing this story I said nothing to the lady as the others were also silent... They do not want to talk, they try to play things down [...]. They do not want to deal with this problem. Perhaps too painful. Perhaps someone persuaded them it was not so... Because at the time it was happening, we were not allowed to talk about it. So we had to conceal it” (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a, 35).*

The story is a typical case of a conspiracy of silence, a phenomenon “whereby a group of people tacitly agree to outwardly ignore something of which they are all personally aware” (Zerubavel, 2006, 2). It is common knowledge never discussed in public, an undiscussable, uncomfortable “open secret”, tightly connected to denial (Zerubavel, 2006, 2–4). According to Halbwachs (2001), “the social space” (a system of inter-individual relations) enables the transmission of memory; if these “collective milieus” do not exist, the silence appears (Gensburger, 2020). Such can be the case in this environment, where people avoid talking about exodus.

Besides being treated as fascists by the new Yugoslavian regime in Istria, Italians became strangers in their own home due to the upheaval of socio-political circumstances and the entirely changed social network. After two decades of oppressive fascistic politics they also experienced a painful change in their social status, a reversal from the dominant self-perception as representatives of *civiltà* (civilisation) in contrast to the “barbaric” Slavs (Baskar, 2010, 110–18). The individual memories of the Italians who remained do not,

11 On foibe cf.: Ballinger, 2003, 129–67; Dota, 2010; Pirjevec 2009; Verginella, 2009, 53–67; Orlić, 2012, 19 etc.

12 I have frequently heard memories of humiliation experienced by Italian children in school, frequently from the children of Slovenian schools or the Yugoslav system. It can be about spitting, taunting from the children of Slovenian schools or in this case, not wanting to give firewood to the child to warm the class with the explanation that for the few of them it is not needed.

to this day, coincide with either the Slovenian or Italian dominant narrative about the exodus. They differ from the Slovenian narrative in that the latter interprets the exodus as a voluntary migration or as a consequence of the victory over fascism. Although scholars have brought into question this kind of narrative after the independence of Slovenia (e.g. Gombač, 2005; Kacin Wohinz & Troha, 2001), as shown by many interviews and the feedback that I received in general it seems that it had no effect on the dominant narratives (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a, 53).<sup>13</sup> Unlike the Italian memory, however, Italians who remained are well aware of the cause-and-effect links between the exodus and fascism, which the Italian public discourse denies. Moreover, the burden of not recognising collective responsibility for fascist violence by the Italian state fell on the Italians who remained in Yugoslavia (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a). The silence of the Istrians of all ethnicities who experienced exodus lies in the incompatibility of their memories with the dominant collective memory. Usually, as stories of defeat, the bearers of negative heritages and imaginaries, these kinds of memories are uncomfortable for both scholars and societies, therefore they are excluded from national narratives (Ballinger, 2012, 380; Baussant, 2019, 38, 155, 176; 2002, 286). Scholars in Yugoslavia have researched this topic less intensively than on the Italian side (e.g. Dota, 2010; Gombač, 2005), while the topic of the demographic and social restoration of Istrian society was almost completely ignored (Kalc, 2019, 148). While the silent memory of the *esuli* became part of the Italian national victimisation narrative in the 1990s (Corni, 2018, 74–78; Focardi, 2020, 214–58), it is interesting to note that the memories of the Italians who remained continued to be uncomfortable not only for Slovenian, but also the Italian national discourse. As stories of the ones who decided not to leave their home, Istria, they do not conform with the dominant Italian narrative “of no choice left for Italians” and thus of the forced ethnically-based migrations.

Among Italians who remained I noticed also some silence and pretence of not knowing about some Italians who collaborated with the new system and even helped exert pressure on Italians to leave (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a, 103). Oral historians say silence is the result of the tense social relations that arise in rebellious movements and which, with changes in social systems and hierarchies, conceal social conflicts, shifts in power relations, and civil war in a time when there is violence among members of the same nation, community and even family (Pavone, 1992; Portelli, 1997; Van Boeschoten, 2005, 39; Rožac Darovec, 2012).

From a psychological point of view, the reason for the silence about the exodus could be attributed also to the fact that it was probably considered impermissible to mourn, to express painful memories in the society of the winners, where the affected persons - Italians who remained in Yugoslavia - were

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13 For interpretations of Yugoslavian historiography cf. Dota, 2010, 57–102; for a case of Yugoslavian narrative defending the absence of pressure on Italians, cf. Beltram, 1986, 191.

perceived as being on the side of the war's losers. This can be more obvious in the context of the white-black stereotypical dichotomy of Italians perceived as "fascists" and Yugoslavs perceived as "innocent victims" and war winners. The memories of the Italians who remained can be seen as an unauthorised expression of grief, when, due to external and public expectations or prohibitions, society at large does not recognise or deny the events related to it (Erzar, 2017, 85–87; Hrobat Virloget & Logar, 2020, 263–64).

However, I found out that a major part of silence on the exodus could be attributed to the emotionally charged memories and unprocessed (mostly childhood) traumas. If memory does not process traumas from the past, which is often the case with concentration camp survivors, rape victims and other victims of trauma, there is the danger of a "conspiracy of silence" (Emrich, 2010, 63). The first "silent community" was observed in the 1970s among parents and children of the Holocaust (Straub, 2010, 106). With this kind of silence, connected to Freudian ideas about repression, when individuals bury traumatic and painful memories in the subconscious (Zerubavel, 2006; Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010), people avoid memories that would repeat humiliation, emotional pain and fear (Jurić Pahor, 2004, 40; Emrich, 2010, 63; Straub, 2010, 118). For Aleida Assman (2010) trauma is an inability of verbalisation and narration. We may then ask the question: if the community shares memories on which collective identity is based (Halbwachs, 2001), can the collective identity rely on collective silence? As evidenced by the general silence surrounding the exodus among the Istrian Italians, the answer is yes (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a).

An interesting recent study of a silenced community is about the *Harkis*, the Algerian fighters on the French side in the Franco-Algerian war, by Vincent Crapanzano (2011). They have been stigmatised as traitors by Algerians and betrayed, marginalised, and silenced by the French for whom they risked their lives (Crapanzano, 2011, 9). Their silence is a different kind of silence, the one that speaks about the presence of difficult and shameful memories. As the anthropologist argues, "despite psychologists' stress on forgetting, repression, and foreclosure, forgetting is often far harder than remembering" (Crapanzano, 2011, 9). The prevailing self-narrative of the Italians who remained is that of the anti-fascist fighters. However, this positive image is often in conflict with the dominant narrative of the majoritarian nation about them, stereotyping them as fascists (Hrobat Virloget & Čebon Lipovec, 2017, 48–55; Hrobat Virloget, 2021a, 56–59). This can be one of the reasons for the mistrust and silence towards the majoritarian nation and towards me as a researcher who is part of it. Luisa Passerini (2014, 29) notes that silences are relative. We have to reflect, "in respect to whom and what is it a silence"? Relations of power between the majoritarian narrative and the minoritarian are one of the reasons, but as it has been shown, the conspiracy of silence is linked also to the members of the Italian minority themselves. The reason for silence does not derive solely from the authoritarian regime, but "is also accepted or even

chosen by whole community or society” (Passerini, 2014, 23). In this case, it is a way to survive in a majoritarian narrative different from theirs, to remain invisible<sup>14</sup> in a society with the self-perception of the heroic winners.

Silence can be paradoxically filled with words, which presents a special methodological challenge. Such was the case of the conversation with an Italian lady, which unfolded in such a way that she mostly read from her notes, a mixture of personal memories underpinned by “objective” historical facts of the history of Pula/Pola during and after WWII. When after one hour she had read through everything she had written, she broke down in tears. All her relatives joined the exodus, and she remained alone with her grandparents and father, a pain she had never got over. She explained why she had written down her memories for the interview: “Because these things hurt, people don’t want to talk about this because they relive it... That’s why I made notes yesterday because I wanted to relive these things a little, so that I wouldn’t cry in public. People don’t want to relive things because these are painful situations, very painful” (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a, 32).

Even though they speak, people can censor and discipline their memories as they try to consciously avoid them or restructure them in a rational and impersonal way. These are tactics to retain control over emotionally burdensome memories that are not compatible with a majoritarian collective memory, as demonstrated in studies of silence concerning the Franco-Algerian War by *pieds-noirs* (Smith, 2006, 147–59). Silence cannot be defined on the basis of absence of speech, because it is precisely verbal communication that can have the function of concealment (Marković, 2020, 178–79). Traumatic personal experiences are avoided by narrating the “grand narrative”, by speaking about politics and history (Waynryb, 2002, 30; Marković, 2020, 185). The case above is one of several cases indicating the fear of showing unwanted emotions as pain or trauma in front of the researcher and especially in the public space (for example, in bars). Indeed, the whispering about the violence against Italians happened mostly in the public space, while in a home environment these kinds of memories seem to be more clearly expressed.

Many silences pass unnoticed by the researcher (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a, 32; Marković, 2020, 181; Passerini, 2014, 17). Such was the case of an interview with an Italian who returned to Italy after his family went to Yugoslavia in a “contra-exodus”.<sup>15</sup> If I had not been told previously by his son that his

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14 The invisibility of the Italians who remained, as a strategy of survival in a majoritarian nation, was evoked a few times in our discussions by the journalist and historian Stefano Lusa.

15 The “counter-exodus” consisted of thousands of workers from Monfalcone and Friuli who settled in Yugoslavia with the aim of building a socialist state. Their number is most frequently put at around 2,000 or between 3,000 and 3,500, while some Slovenian sources talk of 10,000 people—including POWs. The reason was ideological, but unemployment due to destroyed industry was another reason. According to the Italian historian Raoul Pupo, this is only propaganda that aims to reduce the scale of the exodus as a kind of counterbalance; however, the numbers do not support this argument (Purini, 2010, 263–72; Pupo, 2015, 33–34).



father would keep quiet about his father-in-law's experience of Goli Otok - the communist re-education camp – I would have had no idea about this, but even being aware of it, I did not dare question him on the matter (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a, 32). It is known that following liberation in 1956, all internees at this camp had to keep silent about their experiences, otherwise they would be rearrested (Purini, 2010, 272). Another case as the case of the “hero” mentioned above when the period of the fear of speaking has ended, but the silence of the ones who experienced it, persists.

## DETECTING SILENCE AND THE IMPACT OF RESEARCH

As anthropologists and oral historians, we are not trained to detect the silence behind words and gestures of our interlocutors, in contrast to psychotherapists, for whom right silence is a medium for entering the intrapsychic world of a person (Bohak, 2012, 40–51; Tojnko, 2014, 72–75; Hrobat Virloget & Logar, 2020). I became aware of that in the study case where I conducted an interview together with a psychotherapist, where only the therapist's eye observed a slight moment of hesitation, some small physical gesture that even seventy years later expressed embodied fear while discussing communist spies in an Istrian village. After being asked about them by the psychotherapist, who noticed something different in the man's behaviour, the man tried to change the topic of conversation (Hrobat Virloget & Logar, 2020, 165). Psychotherapists are aware that “the body remembers” (Van der Kolk, 2014; Gostečnik, 2008, 251) and researchers of humanities and social sciences agree that silences are embodied. Even these silenced memories can be transmitted from generation to generation via a system of signs as a form of communication of the unspeakable past in the present. In Halbwachs' words, the transmission of (non)memory is performed intimately as a “lived” memory interwoven with the social milieu of everyday experience (Kidron, 2009, 18; Halbwachs, 2001; Wajnryb, 2001). The psychological *present past* is inscribed into the body and behaviour, no matter how much time has passed since the events. In the case of intergenerational transmission of silence emotions and behaviour are borrowed, because they belong to the parents' past (Straub, 2010, 73, 102). This can be the case of holocaust survivors, their perpetrators, or people on the “wrong side” during the war where one generational trauma and crime are kept secret and subconsciously transferred onto the next generations (Bohleber 2010, 80; Pabst, 2022, 165). In German society psychoanalysts have detected a wider phenomenon of the inability to ask, where *not wanting to know* acts as a defence strategy. In the families' silence something absent is experienced as massively present (Bohleber, 2010, 72, 79). This was the case of an Italian who remained, one of those who refused to give me an interview during my research. She spoke about the family's silence in tears at the presentation of my book (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a).<sup>16</sup>

16 Organised by the Italian minority in Izola/Isola (11. 2. 2022).

[The book] *made me think about the silence. My mom's silence and the education that she gave us and I can't speak [tears]... I'm wondering how much does this education of silence influence our daily silences, it's this that made me think of your book. Why are we still afraid to talk, not only about the past but also about the present. I think in school I was educated to be silent about certain topics* (Interlocutor 1, 2022).

The ethnologist Kathrin Pabst observes that traumatic events are silenced by the survivors in an attempt to forget and protect their children, while the next generation feel the “ghosts” of the untold, but they do not dare to ask in order to avoid touching the pain they feel from their parents. The conspiracy of silence and the trauma comes primarily from the untold, from not addressing the cause of the trauma, while the reason for it, e.g. forced migrations, war, are only of a secondary importance (Pabst, 2023, 90, 97).

However, when speaking about exodus I have the feeling that in recent years people feel it is easier to speak about it than at the time of my fieldwork, which started twelve years ago. I wonder if that is also the consequence of the impact of my book, which was accepted with great interest in the wider public of the Primorska (littoral) region (Hrobat Virloget, 2021a). Historians would warn to be attentive to the time and social context when the research was done, since some decades ago victimisation discourses were not so fashionable as today (Verginella, 2012; Bidussa, 2009). My interlocutor commented that the book made her aware why she gets so emotive, why she is not able to talk when she has to speak about herself and exodus. Psychoanalysts argue that in order to erase something, in this case the pain that produces silence, it has to be first activated and recognised, it has to become present and has to be transferred from the unconscious to the conscious (Emrich, 2010, 64). When research gives voice to the silenced, even if they, too, are analysed in the critical frame, when the silence is articulated, publicly acknowledged and placed in a wider historical and social context, can this enable them to break their silence? As my book and some other researches (e.g. Lampe, 2021) reflect, the professionals, by addressing the silences, “can contribute to the healing processes for individuals, within families and societies” (Pabst, 2023, 100).<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The article has shown some reflections of the reasons and meanings of silence in ethnographic research. The reflections stem from the in-depth research of

<sup>17</sup> The methodological reflections derive from some previous and current ARIS research projects: Migration and social transformation in a comparative perspective: the case of Western Slovenia after WWII, led by Aleksej Kalc (J6-3143; 2021-2024), and Urban Futures: Imagining and Activating Possibilities in Unsettled Times, led by Saša Poljak Istenič (J6-2578; 2020-2023). The article content derive also from the written application of my project Ethnography of silence(s), that started latter, in October 2023 (ARIS J6-50198; 2023-2026).

memories on the Istrian exodus and short ethnographic fieldwork on a WWII national “hero”. In the dominant research silence is treated as a consequence of socio-political power relations, the relationship between dominant and marginalised social groups and memories. Indeed, silence ensues when memory cannot rely on collective memory because it is unacknowledged. It has been shown that the silence can persist also after the change of the old socio-political circumstances that instilled silence; the change of generations and the community’s desire to break the silence can also be important. Another interpretation of silence is connected to Freudian ideas about repression, when traumatic and painful memories are buried in the subconscious in order to avoid painful experiences from the past. By keeping silent people protect themselves and avoid everything that reminds them of the emotional trauma. Silence can also derive from tense social relations, violence, fear, the conflict between the war winners and losers, etc. The denial can connect people in a conspiracy of silence and collective silence can become the identity base of a community.

In some study cases it has been shown how difficult it is to detect silence, especially when it is hidden by words (speaking) or embodied and transmitted through generations through the “ghosts” of the untold. Finally, a reflection is made on the impact of breaking the silence and healing of the individual and social wounds when a research contextualises, acknowledges and articulates the silence.

## KAJ SPOROČA MOLK? TRAVME IN SPOMINSKI KONFLIKTI V ANTROPOLOŠKI RAZISKAVI O ISTRSKEM EKSODUSU IN NACIONALNEM »HEROJU«

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### POVZETEK

*V članku avtorica razmišlja o razlogih in pomenih molka v etnografskem raziskovanju na primeru poglobljene raziskave spominov na istrski eksodus v Istri in kratke terenske raziskave o nacionalnem »heroju« iz druge svetovne vojne v Brkinih na Primorskem. V prevladujočih raziskavah je molk obravnavan kot posledica družbenopolitičnih razmerij moči, razmerja med dominantnimi in marginaliziranimi družbenimi skupinami ter spomini. Molka se namreč pojavi, ko se spomin ne more opreti na kolektivni spomin, ker ga ta zaradi svoje drugačnega pogleda na preteklost cenzurira, izloči. Pokazalo se je, da lahko molk traja tudi po spremembi starih družbenopolitičnih okoliščin, ki so povzročile molka; na spremembo lahko vpliva menjava generacij in želja skupnosti po prekinitvi molka. Drugi vzrok molka je povezan s freudovskimi idejami o potlačanju, ko se travmatične spomine zakoplje v podzavest, da bi se izognili ponovitvi bolečin iz preteklosti. Molka lahko izhaja tudi iz napetih družbenih odnosov, nasilja, strahu, konflikta med zmagovalci in poraženci vojne itd. Zanimanje lahko ljudi poveže v zaroto molka. Če kolektivna identiteta sloni na kolektivnih spominih, lahko ta sloni tudi na kolektivnem molku. Avtorica si zastavi vprašanje, kako prepoznati molka, sploh če je ta skrit za besedami ali utelešen in se prenaša skozi generacije z »duhovi« neizrečenega. Na koncu je podan razmislek o tem, kako lahko raziskava, ki kontekstualizira, priznava in ubesedi molka, vpliva na prekinitev kolektivnega molka ter celjenje individualnih in družbenih ran.*

*Ključne besede: tišina, spominski konflikt, travma, zanimanje, strah, zarota tišine*

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