

## **“Better be quiet”: Silence in Memories of the “Istrian Exodus,” National Heroes and Beliefs**

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### **Abstract**

*From a reflexive point of view, the author questions the problem of silence in ethnographic research. Different types of silences in her field of expertise are discussed: from folklore, beliefs, and memories of World War II and its aftermath, linked to migrations of Italians from the former Yugoslavia (“exodus”) and national war heroes. In different contexts, silence can be seen as a consequence of incompatible memories, traumas, relations between winners and the defeated, etc. In the field of beliefs, silence is generally linked to secrets, be it a sort of resistance against the researcher’s authority or a consequence of the clash of different world-views. The author also focuses on the embodied silent memory, which is difficult to detect.*

**Keywords:** Silence; secret; ethnography; trauma; memories; beliefs; “exodus”; heroes

**E**thnography<sup>1</sup> can be understood as a dialogue between the researcher and the researched through which we try to understand the meanings of social lives in time and space (Reed 2012, 87) or as a meeting of two sets of meanings, those of the ethnographer and the individuals encompassed by the study (Benzecry 2017, 25; Reed 2010). The strength of the ethnographic method by which cultural anthropology or ethnology differs from other humanities and social sciences is, at the same time, its weakness. Namely, the researcher himself is the most important scientific tool. This means that the research involves the researcher’s personality (which in turn makes the researcher question the objective perception of social reality) and ethical principles, such as interfering with the social, political, or religious life of the community, the problem of “real” friendships with informants, the representation of community’s interests, etc. (Eriksen 1995, 25-28; Monaghan and Just 2000, 31-33; Keesing 1981, 9). The psychologist and anthropologist Ellen Corin emphasized the importance of subjective experience in shaping ethnological knowledge, arguing that objective reality is illusory; all of our descriptions of the “other” are the result of our visions that lie deep inside us, and often we are not even aware of them (Corin 2007, 23). One of the consequences of this subjectivity and the effect of the unconscious on the part of the researcher and the researched is silence. In my research field, silence proved to be a linking subject between research topics that seem incredibly different at first glance, namely migrations or population transfers and memories of World War II and its consequences on the one hand, folklore and beliefs on the other. Keeping in mind that one of the tasks of ethnologists is to look into their own overlooked shadow in the process of knowledge creation (Liebing & McLean 2007, 21), this paper reflects on the silence I encountered during my diverse ethnographic field research.

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### Silence around the Post-War “Istrian Exodus”

“People communicate in language, gesture, silence” (Lichterman 2017, 39). Memory is defined as “a narrative structured by individual and collective oblivion” in the frame of “the relationship between the present and the past, silence, and word, between the individual and the collective” (Passerini 2008, 224–225). Therefore, memories cannot be fully analyzed without putting them into the context of silence. We have to understand its boundaries and references, depending on whom or what it is established (Passerini 2008, 252–253).

Silence fills my work on the “Istrian exodus.” This part of the article draws from nine years of ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and interviews with over fifty interlocutors of different ethnicities, Slovenian, Italian, Croatian, Serbian, etc., living in the present-day Slovenian part of Istria.<sup>2</sup> 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), ceded them to the Kingdom of Italy marked by fascist ideology after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire.<sup>3</sup> 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 (Volk 2003, 51), between 200.000 and the exaggerated 350.000 persons left the whole of Istria (including the Croatian part) (Ballinger 2003, 1, 275). The Italian and Slovenian sides have for a long time defended their parallel histories and various reasons for migrations; they have also come up with different numbers of migrants and differing appellations. The dominant Slovenian public discourse presents the “exodus” mostly as a free choice, which comes from the legal right to opt for Italian citizenship, or sometimes as an escape of Italians perceived as war criminals and fascists. In contrast to this, the Italian side perceives the “exodus” in the victimization scope, as a national tragedy, which is expressed by the mythic appellation of “*esodo*,” the “exodus” (Ballinger 2003, 42–45; Hrobat Virloget, Goussef & Corni 2015, etc.). Much research has been done on these migrants,<sup>4</sup> especially on the Italian side, so my research focused on Italians who remained in Istria and were granted the official minority status in Yugoslavia.

In terms of individual memories, the main problem in research on the “exodus” has been silence, especially among Italians (Hrobat Virloget 2021). During the decades following the “exodus,” speaking about it was “taboo” in Istria, not only in the dominant (Yugoslavian) discourse but also among the remaining Italians themselves, especially before the democratization of society and the fall of socialism (Dota 2010, 85; Hrobat Virloget 2017a, 90; Hrobat Virloget 2017b, 40). We have to bear in mind that with the “exodus,” the Italians in Istria lost all essential foundations of their identity. After the emigration of 90% of their ethnic population, they became foreigners in their own homes due to the shift in social/political circumstances and suffered a total loss of their social networks, including even the closest members of their families (Hrobat 2015a, 164–168; Hrobat Virloget 2017a, 2019; Ballinger 2003, 207–244).

With the “exodus” and the new national/political system, they also experienced a change in their social status. Before “exodus”, especially in the time of fascism, they self-perceived themselves as the representatives of *civiltá* (the civilized) as opposed to “barbaric” Slavs, while in the new Yugoslavian context after World War II they have been marginalized and held collectively responsible for decades of fascist oppression and war crimes (Baskar 2010, 110–118; Hrobat Virloget 2015b, 2017b; Hrobat Virloget and Čebrov Lipovec 2017).

On one hand, we can understand silence as a result of incompatibility between the individual and the dominant collective (Yugoslavian and later Slovenian) memories (Hrobat Virloget 2017a). Individual memories can enrich and support collective memory if they are valued, but on the other hand, those individual memories that do not fit into the collective self-image or do not correspond to the collective view of the past are censored, rejected, stigmatized, or excluded from collective (national) discourse (Halbwachs 1925; 1992; Assmann 2007, 16). The memories of Italians who remained in Istria as a national minority are not compatible either with the Slovenian dominant perception of the “exodus” as voluntary migrations or with the official Italian discourse which disregards the period of Italian fascism and starts the narrative with the “exodus” and *foibe*<sup>5</sup> (Fikfak 2009, 243; Dota 2010; Ballinger 2003, 129–167). In contrast with the latter, the Italians who remained in Yugoslavia are well aware of the causal link between the “exodus” and the preceding fascist violence in Istria. As an Italian interlocutor put it in an interview, “shifting things now [about the ‘exodus’] is like placing a mine and not knowing when it will explode,” while another Italian answered, whispering, “Better be quiet. There are plenty of ears everywhere.”<sup>6</sup>

Silence in the research of memories can also be attributed to the fact that the researcher (me) belongs to “the other (Slovenian) side,” that has never shown any empathy for the minority which, before the arrival of the Slovenes, was the majority, at least in urban areas (Kalc 2019, 146). An Italian interlocutor only discovered the “exodus” decades after it occurred through its thematizing in the works of the Italian Istrian novelist Fulvio Tomizza while studying the Italian language at the university in Belgrade:

I remember wondering at home, in 54, 55, how there were 43 of us in class during the first year and every day someone went missing. I would return home and ask: “Mom, Vinicio, Lucio, Maria are all gone, where did they go?” “Ah, they will come back, you will see,” she would reply /mother/. I was young, we lived in isolation. But I tell you, I only discovered the exodus when I read the books of Tomizza. And that happened at the University of Belgrade. /.../ Nobody talked about that. (Vittoria<sup>7</sup>)

The interviews with this Italian woman were accompanied by a constant flow of tears. I was probably the first person interested in listening to her memories of the “exodus.” According to my Italian interlocutors, if by chance the conversation shifted to the “exodus,” everyone immediately fell silent (Hrobat Virloget 2021).

The underlying cause of silence lies not only in the incompatibility of memories with the dominant collective memory but also in individual and collective traumas. This silence can be saturated with words. Curiously, this silence is not only the absence of speech or voice, as the logocentric paradigm would claim (Kidron 2009, 6). Silence is usually understood as “signaling psychopathologized processes of avoidance and repression, socially suspect processes of personal secrecy, or collective processes of political subjugation” (Kidron 2009, 6). There is an interesting case of an Italian interlocutor who prepared herself for the interview by writing a long essay on the topic. The unusual interview was conducted so that the lady did not let herself speak freely about her memories but mostly kept reading her notes for one hour. She intertwined her memories with some “objective,” historical facts, written down, and explained why she wrote down her memories.

Because things are painful, people don't want to talk about this, because they re-experience... That's why I wrote it down yesterday, I wanted to re-experience a bit, but not cry in public. People do not want to re-experience because these are painful situations, very painful and we are not even guilty for it. Neither Slovenes, neither Croats, neither Italians. Things happen, history. (Amalia)

Like the others, she was deeply wounded by the “exodus.”

My family was split in two [with the exodus] and it never united again. This is a wound that has never healed. (Amalia)

The memories of many of my interlocutors can be understood as childhood trauma pushed into the subconscious. As Primo Levi says, “whoever has been wounded, often refuses to remember so that it would not hurt even more” (Levi 2003, 18; Jurić Pahor 2004, 52). Silence can be a consequence of trauma in the sense that avoiding remembrance protects from re-experiencing the pain (Hrobat Virloget 2017a). Similarly, Andrea Smith (2006, 147–159) noticed that the *pieds-noirs*, the French deriving from Algeria, would censor, discipline, and consciously avoid their memories of the Franco-Algerian war, or if they had to speak about, they would structure memories in a rational, impersonal way. She interprets these tactics as an attempt to control the emotionally burdensome memories which were not compatible with the French collective memory of the war (and not recognized for a long time) and which recalled their participation in this civil war.

Historians also explain silence as a consequence of tense social relations that emerge in rebellious movements and which, by the reversal of the social system and hierarchies, conceal social conflicts, shifts in power relations, and civil war in a time when violence occurs among members of the same nation, community and even family (Portelli 1997; van Boeschoten 2005). In some cases, my Italian interlocutors told me that the silence of some of the Italians who stayed in Yugoslavia has to be attributed to their collaboration with the new socialist authorities and the politics of “ethnic cleansing” of Italians from Istria (Hrobat Virloget 2021).

Silence arises when memory cannot rely on collective memory because it is deleted or censored. Psychoanalysts note that in the case of intergenerational transmission of experiences of genocide (although these are far grislier events), if the experiences of parents are not acknowledged as historical truth and if the perpetrators have not admitted their crimes, the trauma breaks into delirium, a suffocating nightmare. According to Freud, parents’ experiences have to be perceived as historical truth; otherwise, family experiences remain similar to delirium that has no connection with the actuality of their own lives (Althounian 2005, xiv). It can be perceived as inappropriate to express mourning, associated with painful memories in a society of where the affected person is on the side of the defeated (Erzar 2017, 85), as Italians are perceived in the prevalent Yugoslavian (later Slovenian) collective memory in a black and white dichotomy. The internalization of this prohibition against mourning may be a consequence of unauthorized mourning where, due to external, public expectations or prohibitions, broader society does not approve or denies the historical events connected with it (Erzar 2017, 85-87). The pain of remaining Italians is kept inside, in the intimate world of the individual, due to the disregard of their right to be perceived as victims by the winning side, the Yugoslavians / Slovenes. In the Slovenian dominant discourse, the Italians have been perceived as perpetrators, fascists, or having the free will to opt for Italy. From this perspective, one can understand silence or refusal to take part in my interviews; on one side the Italians who migrated refused interviews with me because they continue to experience deep pain and anger towards the Yugoslavians / Slovenes, whom they perceive as perpetrators. And on the other side many of the Italians who remained in Istria refused to speak with me because they experience pain in how they are seen, not understood by the dominant society of the winners.

When referring to post-imperial and post-colonial displacements in the “postwar” period, as the “Istrian exodus” can be interpreted,<sup>8</sup> Pamela Ballinger and Michèle Baussant use the term “extruded histories” or “*exclus de l’histoire*.” As stories of defeat, they are uncomfortable for both scholars and societies, the bearers of negative heritages and imaginaries (Ballinger 2012, 380; Baussant 2019, 38, 155, 176; 2002, 286). However, the breaking of public silence surrounding the “Istrian exodus” in Italy took place in a time of emerging alternative memories across Europe (see Assmann 2007), with the right-wing Italian government using “selected chapters” (“exodus” and “foibe”) from Italian history in the national memory (Corni 2018, 75–77). Omitting the period of fascism transformed Italy’s role in World War II from that of perpetrator to that of victim (Fikfak 2009). On the other hand, in Eastern and Central European states, histories have been rewritten and similar massive expulsions silenced, with the symbols and monuments of migrants destroyed, erased, or transformed (Bazzin and Perron 2018, 31). Although in the former Yugoslavia a minor fraction of the Italian population remained and became protected as a national minority, they have been marginalized in the dominant collective discourse, with their memories and heritage silenced and neglected (Hrobat Virloget 2021; Hrobat Virloget et al. 2016, 80). As was the case in most communist countries, the new inhabitants of the newly colonized urban areas after World War II were under the influence of the hegemonic hegemonic on

new national states, which altered urban histories and explained the material remains of the expelled inhabitants in line with the uniform state vision of reinvented history (Ruble 2003; Sezneva 2003). Decades had to pass before alternative memories were heard (in the time of the democratization in the 1990s). However, in the case of Istria, the remains of the past were physically present in the form of the Italian minority and its heritage, but remained silenced or adapted to the Yugoslavian hegemonic project.

### **Memories of Post-War Society in Yugoslavia and National Heroes**

Researchers who deal with the transmission of extremely traumatic experiences among concentration camp survivors have noticed that they did not talk about their experiences of persecution to their families but rather kept silent (Jurić Pahor 2004, 52). However, silence does not mean non-communication or a failure to communicate. On the contrary, it can be a strong form of communication (Jurić Pahor 2004, 53). Although silent, the intergenerational interaction between concentration camp survivors and their children can be considered a form of communication or transmission through a system of signs or embodied memory (Kidron 2009; Waynryb 2001). In Halbwach's words, the transmission is performed intimately as a "lived" memory interwoven with everyday experience's social milieu (Kidron 2009, 18; Halbwachs 1992).

This kind of embodied memory or bodily memory practices (Kidron 2009) reminds me of an interview about experiences of World War II and population transfers in Istria, which I conducted together with a psychotherapist whose primary role was to observe the interlocutor, his uncle. This person has lived through intense and difficult past experiences, being forced to serve in two opposing armies (German and Yugoslavian) during World War II, experiencing captivity and, after World War II, being sent off as a teacher to establish the Slovenian school system in the annexed part of Istria. Despite all these traumatic life experiences, I did not notice any signs that would indicate a silenced memory or trauma during the interview. However, the psychotherapist noticed some tiny physical signs indicating the interlocutor's silence which I did not notice. A tiny moment of hesitation, a slight unconscious change in his behavior was indicating the presence of fear when talking about communist spies more than seven decades later (Hrobat Virloget, Logar 2020). This collaboration made me realize how feeble we, the ethnologists, sometimes are in deciphering body language in the absence of words, having no professional knowledge of the human psyche. As psychotherapists are well aware, "the body always remembers" (Gostečnik 2008, 251). Are we, the ethnologists, able to detect this?

The fear of speaking out more than seven decades after World War II was evident also in the collective silence surrounding a Slovenian national hero from World War II. Although memories of this hero were kept in silence, making it almost impossible for me to find hints of the perceptions surrounding this figure, many years ago, the collective silence was loud enough to prevent an erection of a monument in his honor. In two municipalities, the one that he originated from and the neighboring one, the idea of erecting his likeness was abandoned because of public disapproval. His bust was eventually placed in Koper/Capodistria in Istria (in 2010), a town largely unknown

to the local community (Hrobat Virloget & Čebtron Lipovec 2017, 55–65). Although I come from his home region, I encountered severe difficulties when searching for any information concerning him. I had to pass through villages in the company of my uncle, a local, searching for someone who would tell me something about the man, hoping that the familiarity and friendship with my uncle would encourage people to speak. In their eighties or nineties at the time of my research, the people who personally knew this man would immediately fall silent when the conversation shifted towards him. The only ones who told me something more on the topic were their children, who heard about him in their families’ intimate circles. Among the answers received were such as “You are walking on thin ice,” “the one who was killing people [after the war] with a pick,” “many people lost their lives because of him for nothing,”<sup>9</sup> “women would never let him get out of his village alive if he was brought in,” “a rapist,” etc. When I tried to get some data about him with the help of a friend, a local from the area, she received a definitive answer: “I hope you haven’t told them [the researchers] that somebody from [village] knows something about him!!!” Multiple accounts of rape and other similar misdeeds are recorded and available on personal on-line blogs and even published in a monograph (Perme, Žitnik & Žitnik 2000). They underline the dissonance between memories on the national, regional, and individual level or in the national glorification of a man who is locally perceived as an anti-hero, illustrating the perversion of politics after World War II. As somebody commented: “It was worse after World War II than during it” (Hrobat Virloget & Čebtron Lipovec 2017, 60).

From the ethnological point of view, it is not so much the historical truth about this anti-hero that is interesting, but the persistent collective silence concerning him. The situation can be compared to the reflections from Croatia, where (like in Slovenia) after World War II, only one official version of memory existed, one of anti-fascist fighters, which became sacralized. Unofficial memories were preserved at the margins, especially within the diaspora. The end of socialism and the democratic processes of the 1990s re-evaluated the winners, i.e., the anti-fascist fighters, who were protected from all criticism until then. Furthermore, it led to historical revisionism, to the criminalization and demonization of the winners of World War II, and the rehabilitation of the defeated Ustasha (Čapo Žmegač 2015, 123–124; Cipek 2009). Generally, the collapse of the bipolar political system in 1989 triggered an explosion of suppressed memories all over Europe. Many of the nations from the former Eastern bloc are still in the process of re-making their ancient national myths and establishing new ones, based on the intertwined memories of both persecutions and collaborations, both victimization and guilt (Assmann 2007, 16).

Yet, in the scope of the given case study, it is outstanding that the suppressed memories (concerning heroes or post-war times) of ordinary people did not “explode”—as could be expected after the fall of the system which was prescribing official memory—but rather remained in collective silence. Why? Is it because Slovenian identity is still based on the “just”<sup>10</sup> Nation Liberation Movement struggle and any tarnishing of it is still considered inappropriate? It reminds us of Orlando Figes’s book *The Whis-*

*perers* (2007), which talks about ordinary people under the Stalinist system having to whisper from fear of being heard. People got used to living double lives: information, thoughts, religious beliefs, family values, interpersonal relationships, and everything that was not congruent with the measures of the Soviet existence was hidden from one's neighbors, even from one's own children. People learned to whisper (Figs 2009, 13). Similarly, people "had to be careful of what they say / ... / because they ended up in jail for every wrong word."<sup>11</sup>

Why do people continue to whisper today? Besides ascribing the persisting collective silence to the incompatibility between the individual, regional memories, and national collective memory, there are also deeper reasons, connected with psychological aspects, due to which "silence became the base, constructor of peoples identity."<sup>12</sup>

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 recognized and named (Erzar 2017, 31, 85). This has not occurred in the case of the anti-hero glorified by the authority of the state, which is in dissonance (or ignorance?) with horrifying local memories of the man.

### **Silence in the research of beliefs**

Another type of silence in ethnographic research is that I encountered during my research on folk beliefs. In contrast to the previous type, this silence is more closely connected to individual or community secrets than traumas or incompatible memories.

Pre-Christian beliefs of the so-called "staroverci," "old faith believers," have long been kept a secret. This community was primarily composed of elderly unmarried men who maintained pre-Christian beliefs and practices in west Slovenia until the 1960s. At that point, some of them decided to unveil a part of their religious secrets (not rituals) to a single person, Pavel Medvešček. His publication of the interviews with them and the fragments of their beliefs (Medvešček 2015) after the end of his long-lasting silence, honoring an oath, encountered an enthusiastic acceptance by the wider public on the one hand and divided professionals on the other. Some distanced themselves from this material, finding it unreliable; others (including me) considered this material seriously and begun to analyze it (see Hrobat Virloget 2019; 2017a).

A question often raised was why such pre-Christian beliefs would only come out so late, keeping in mind that many ethnographers have previously performed research in that same remote mountain region in west Slovenia but have not found anything similar. An eminent Slovenian researcher of folk beliefs Zmago Šmitek (2013), questioned in this regard the efficiency of the ethnographic methods of so-called "insiders" against that of "outsiders" ethnographic method. While ethnologists and cultural anthropologists focused on the "outsider's view" as the basis for their research, these data demonstrated the importance of the "insiders view." These community secrets were unveiled to persons<sup>13</sup> close to their communities and not to outsiders, which is what ethnologists frequently are.

Mattijs van de Port (1999, 26) questioned the classical ethnographic method, warning about the pitfall of "good informants" in ethnography because much anthropo-

logical knowledge is only based on small groups of cooperative “others.” But these are in fact, those who accept strangers—researchers, speak their language and are not “the others” to the extent we imagine.

Often ethnologists or folklorists visit and leave a community as strangers. We do an interview with a person, sometimes several of them, and we rarely return. This was how I was doing my folkloristic research, and only years later, when I returned to my home area and the region of my research to settle down, I was told that people had misled me in my studies. They did not want to tell me their community’s secrets about their past worship or beliefs, so they told me other stories just to give me a sense that they were collaborating. For them, I was an outsider, and personal beliefs are not meant for outsiders. On some occasions, I was well aware of something secret, something people would hide from me, like in the case of a stone monolith called *Baba/Hag* worshiped decades ago.<sup>14</sup> Some communities have secrets, which are widely known to have the status of a secret. Such is the case of a ritual with sexual symbolism performed in Boljunec/Bagnolli della Rosandra, a village with a Slovenian population in Italy, performed every year when the boys enter the community of young men in the village. The secret ritual cannot be unveiled to any strangers, researchers, not even to the local villagers (Slavec 2017, 89; Hrobat Virloget 2017a). This was clearly shown to me on the occasion when, after researching for fifteen years in a village (Rodik), a contributor finally told me about a stone connected to local beliefs. When I asked her why she had not told me this before, she just shrugged (Hrobat Virloget 2017a).

The question of the role of silence in ethnography requires further reflection of the influence of the researcher’s position, i.e., the position of the authoritative observer (Lichterman 2017, 37). Anne M. Lovel questions how a secret from which ethnologists are excluded influences the production of ethnological knowledge. The secret implies power relations between the ethnologist and the researched and can often be seen as resistance to the anthropologist’s authority or others who exercise power. In these cases, it is not about intimate individual secrets that require the same degree of unveiling by the anthropologist or at least the promise of secrecy (Lovell 2007, 57, 72–73), but the secrets of a particular social group. Important, in this case, is the ethical attitude of the ethnologist, which leaves people with their right to their intimate knowledge and accepts ethnological knowledge and descriptions of “the other” as limited and incomplete (Benzercy 2017, 31). The right to the secret of “the other” among us is well illustrated by the case of one of my students, who studied the traditional medicine of her grandmother. The woman refused to describe to her a traditional medicine rite saying, “once it’s uttered, it loses power.” Words, therefore, have power, and only the designated can have access to them.

Researchers of beliefs often narrate their difficulties in ethnographic research, such as the unwillingness of contributors to explain beliefs to “outsiders”, often even more pronounced when their religious beliefs have been persecuted. A question is raised about the responsibility of the researcher penetrating into such intimate worlds as beliefs (Jordan 2003, 152).

Claire Laurier Decoteau points to the problem of a difference of worldviews between the researcher and the researched. In exploring the narratives of illnesses and explanations of their causes in South Africa, she noted that her interlocutors felt the presence of their ancestors just as much as they were aware of structural inequalities in neoliberal capitalism and as they believed in modern medicine. The “witches” were just one of the social forces among many others that influenced them. In any case, they saw the world in a slightly different way than the researcher. If we consider ontology as a matter of perspective, one of the ethnographer’s tasks is to learn “to see otherwise” by situating him-/herself in the systems of the signification of the researched (Decoteau 2017, 68-69). Mattijs van de Port also mentions the conflict of two different worldviews in his ethnographic film *The Possibility of Spirits* (van de Port 2014; 2017). In exploring African-Brazilian *candomblé* beliefs, the researcher became aware of the limitations of his own Eurocentric belief that ghosts do not exist and indicated the limitations of research when the researcher’s perspective or worldview influences the production of knowledge about the “other” (van de Port 2014). In discovering “otherness,” he argues for reducing the cultural distance between the anthropologist and the anthropologised (van de Port 1999, 8; Cohen 1994, 5), for giving up the a priori superiority of anthropological knowledge and “seriously play with the possibility of the truth and authority of an (alien) culture” (McGrane 1989, 127–128; van de Port 1999, 8).

I got the chance to reflect on these issues during my field research of the mythical landscape in Cavtat, Croatia. When we discussed the links between pre-Christian cult places and “energy sources” and dowsing with the local ethnologist, his mother showed us a family secret, an object, a little bag with unknown contents, called the “house force” (Cro. *kućna moć*).<sup>15</sup> She was interested in my opinion about the “force” this object was supposed to possess. It made me think that the lady would have never shown me this object if I were to ask her about her beliefs as an ethnologist. But as she understood that my worldview did not differ so much from hers because of my interest in dowsing, as she felt that I would not condemn her for being superstitious from an authoritative scientific position, she unveiled to me her family’s secret. When the lady oscillated between acceptance and doubt concerning her object, we see a casual event that Carlo Severi calls the essence of any belief (Severi 2015, 207–228). Let us think of the limitations of ethnographic research when different worldviews or “world-makings” (van de Port & Meyer 2018, 16) clash. Because of all these silent secrets, we, the ethnologists have to be well aware of our limited access to “others,” even if those “others” are among us. Similar limitations can be illustrated by the object discussed above, the “house secret.” As an ethnologist, I can say nothing about it and must agree with van de Port (1999, 13): some phenomena can simply not be measured with scientific tools.

## Conclusion

This discussion has approached different types of silence encountered during the author’s field research related to folklore, beliefs, and memories of World War II and its

aftermath linked to migrations and national heroes. It has been shown that the ethnologists only produce partial knowledge, one reason for which lies in silence.

In the field of memories, silence can be interpreted as a result of incompatible individual and collective memories. Individual memories that do not fit into the collective view of the past are censored, rejected, stigmatized, or excluded from collective (national) discourse (Halbwachs 1925; 2001; Assmann 2007, 16). Such is the case of the silent memories of Italians who remained in post-war Yugoslavia despite mass migrations, the “exodus” of most of their fellow Italians to Italy after the annexation of Istria to Yugoslavia. Their memory is not compatible with either the official Italian national discourse based on victimization or the Yugoslavian/Slovenian perceptions of the “exodus” as voluntary migration. The incompatibility of individual, collective, regional vs. national memories also explains why the silence surrounding the national hero or the regional anti-hero persisted.

The second cause of silence lies in individual and collective traumas. The Italians who remained in Yugoslavia after the “exodus” became foreigners in their own homes due to the change in social/political circumstances and total loss of their social networks, including even the closest family members, for many of them a wound that never healed. In this case, avoiding remembrance protects people from re-experiencing the (childhood) traumas pushed into the subconscious (Levi 2003, 18; Jurić Pahor 2004, 52). Memory is censored, disciplined to control the emotionally burdensome events, not compatible with the dominant perception (Smith 2006, 147–159). On the collective level, the remaining Italians experienced the reversal of their social status from the “civilized” under fascism to the marginalized, collectively stigmatized as fascists or the defeated in the war. It can be inappropriate to express painful memories in a society of war winners where the affected area on the side of the defeated (Erzar 2017, 85). Italians are perceived in the prevalent Yugoslavian/Slovenian collective memory in this black and white dichotomy. As historians argue, silence can also be a consequence of power struggles within the community, especially during times of reversals of social systems (Portelli 1997; Van Boeschoten 2005). Besides, until historical events—or better to say, someone’s vision of the past—are acknowledged as constructs, memories concerning them remain suppressed (Althounian 2005, xiv). As shown in the case of memories of the hero or anti-hero, silence can become a way to survive in a politically repressive system (Figs 2007) or a constructor of peoples’ identity. As Hana Ostan Ožbolt, the curator of a contemporary art exhibition on silence, reflects, silence is how individuals avoid the pain of remembering traumatic experiences and in which the rest of society avoids the victims unwanted truth (Kač 2020).

A type of silenced memory that ethnologists—in contrast to psychotherapists—are not trained to detect are the bodily memory practices or embodied memory (Kidron 2009). To grasp the meaning of silence, an interdisciplinary collaboration between anthropology, history, and, most importantly, psychology is required.

In the field of beliefs, silence is more closely linked to secrets of individuals or communities, as has been shown in the case of the long-lasting silence by the so-called “staroverci,” “old faith believers” in Slovenia, and during some of the author’s field

studies on folklore. A question has been raised about the efficiency of “the outsider’s view” versus “the insider’s view” in accessing the most personal beliefs. Since anthropologists are usually “the outsiders,” strangers to the researched community, attention has been drawn to the pitfall of the “good” informants, the small group of cooperative “others” who are not as “other” as we imagine (van de Port 1999, 26). Silence in the field of beliefs can be the consequence of keeping an individual or community secret from the researcher, of resistance against the authority of the researcher, or the result of the clash between different worldviews or world-makings (van de Port and Meyer 2018, 16; Decoteau 2017, 68–69). To bridge this gap resulting in silence, I agree with Mattijs van de Port who argues for a need to reduce the cultural distance between the anthropologist and the anthropologised and to surrender the superiority of anthropological knowledge (van de Port 1998, 8; Cohen 1994, 5; McGrane 1989, 127–128).<sup>16</sup>

### Notes

- 1 The article derives from a previously published article on silence in ethnography written in Slovene (Hrobat Virloget 2017a); some excerpts from post-war memories and the Istrian “exodus” were published in English (Hrobat Virloget, Čebren Lipovec 2017; Hrobat Virloget 2019). However, the present composition is much more detailed and includes new reflections, case-studies and literature references.
- 2 The peninsula of Istria is located in the Northern Adriatic and it is divided today between different states, Slovenia and Croatia and a tiny part in Italy.
- 3 Fascist ideology and violent Italianization of multi-ethnic areas were the cause of migrations of thousands of Slovenes and Croats to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (Gombač 2005; Ballinger 2003; Verginella 2015).
- 4 Named *optanti* in the Slovenian and Croatian discourse, deriving from the legal right to opt, or *esuli* by Italians, denoting refugees.
- 5 In Italian discourse, the *foibe* (deep natural sinkholes, common in Karst and Istria) have acquired the national status of *lieux de memoire* with political, almost mythical connotations. In the Italian dominant memory. They are believed to contain the remains of ethnic Italians, who were killed in 1943 and 1945 under the alleged Slavic terror, with their only crime “being Italian” (Fikfak 2009, 358; Ballinger 2003, 98). Slovene researchers, on the other hand, argue that the *foibe* killings were motivated by ideology and included executions of many members of the Slovenian anti-communist home guard and collaborators (Pirjevec 2009).
- 6 The speeches have been translated from Italian to English by the author.
- 7 Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the names of the interlocutors are invented. The interviews are kept by the author of the article.
- 8 Although most of the researchers interpret the “Istrian exodus” in a broader framework of displacement out of Central and Eastern Europe during and immediately after World War II, Pamela Ballinger argues for its interpretation in a (post)imperial frame when after the defeat of fascism Italy lost territories in Africa and the Balkans (Ballinger 2015).
- 9 Such was the case of the interlocutor whose father was killed by the Nazis in revenge of the

hero's attacks.

- 10 From the words of the president of the national assembly Milan Brglez in the commemorative speech, held in Strunjan/Strugnano in Istria 20 March 2015 (Hrobat Virloget 2015a, 161).
- 11 Ana Nekič, a local social worker, who performed a study on psycho-sociological aspects of World War II in Brkini for her Master's degree, personal communication.
- 12 Ana Nekič, personal communication.
- 13 Another author reporting of these pre-Christian beliefs, but in another area, Karst, is Boris Čok (2012). Neither him or Pavel Medvešček are ethnologists.
- 14 The worship was registered in the interviews of »staroverci«, »old-faith believers« (Medvešček 2015).
- 15 Interestingly, the same expression, force, “moč”, can be encountered in “staroverci”, “old faith believers” in Slovenia and similarly, the secret knowledge of the house forces called the “tročan”, Eng. triangle, was kept secret by certain family members (Medvešček 2015, 37, 42, 43, 48, 49 etc.).
- 16 Reflections in this article derive from several ARRS research projects: Migration control in the Slovenian area from the times of Austria-Hungary to independent Slovenia, lead by Aleksej Kalc (J6-8250; 2020-23); postdoctoral ARRS project, The burden of the past. Co-existence in the (Slovenian) Coast region in light of the formation of post-war Yugoslavia (Z6-4317; 2012-14), and Inventory, analysis and evaluation of the primary and secondary sources of Slovene researchers on ‘the old faith in the region of Soča river’, lead by Anja Ragolič (V6-1923; 2019-21).

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