

“THE INNER FRONTIER” BORDERS, NARRATIVES, AND CULTURAL INTIMACY IN TOPOLÒ/TOPOLOVE

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On 21 December 2007 one of the most contentious borders in Europe, the one between Slovenia and northeastern Italy, finally opened. This article presents narratives from the village of Topolò, near the Italian–Slovenian border, by three generations that lived with the border in different ways. Some people developed strategies to bypass it, whereas others built up a contrasting ethnicity and an “inner frontier” that emotionally shapes their lives.

Keywords: mechanisms of boundary construction, Slovenian minority in Italy, contrasting ethnicity, Slovenian-Italian border, narrating borderlands, Italianization.

21. decembra 2007 je bila naposled odprta ena spornejših mej v Evropi, tista med Slovenijo in severovzhodno Italijo. Članek predstavlja pripovedi treh rodov iz vasi Topolò ob italijansko-slovenski meji. Ti so z mejo živeli na različne načine: nekateri so razvili strategije, da so jo obšli, drugi so si ustvarili nasprotno etničnost in “notranjo mejo”, ki čustveno oblikuje njihova življenja.

Ključne besede: mehanizmi ustvarjanja mejnosti, slovenska manjšina v Italiji, razločevalna etničnost, slovensko-italijanska meja, pripovedovanje o mejnosti, italijanizacija.

DIVIDED MEMORIES

Climbing up the narrow streets of Topolò (Sl. Topolove, Topolovo, or Tapulouve),¹ the place where I carried out my research, you end up encountering a very unusual thing. This is a sculpture, set up in 1995, made from parts of old farm tools and representing an animal that howls towards the border. It stands near the houses, just before the hills covered with vineyards, like a watchdog. It seems to howl like a furious beast, or like a wounded animal, against the border that on 14 September 1947 separated this village from its fields and from its agricultural and exchange outlets, which remained beyond the frontier, in Yugoslavia. In addition, it separated the inhabitants of Topolò/Topolove from their relatives and friends, and from their economic and social exchanges with Livek (Ital. Luico) and the upper Isonzo/Soča Valley, including the town of Kobarid (Ital. Caporetto). On 21 December 2007, the Republic of Slovenia joined the Schengen area, so that the border between northeastern Italy and Slovenia, one of the cruelest and most disruptive borders in Europe, was finally opened. On this border, and around its creation, events occurred that prolonged the horror of the Second World War far beyond its end.

¹ Topolò/Topolove – Val Natisone/Nadiža river valley – Udine, Italy.



Sculpture, set up in 1995, made from parts of old farm tools and representing an animal that howls towards the border (Photo: D. Cozzi).

This essay emphasizes the impact that state definition and regulation at borders can have on people's identities there, and explores the extent to which people's own subjectivities reflect, contradict, or challenge these state classifications. The Slovenian minority in these valleys appear to have been "written off" by Italian state history.

Fascism's strategy of Italianizing the valleys of the Natisone River started in 1931, with a prohibition against using the people's native Slovenian in schools and in church ceremonies. Language, as the most visible and active sign of a contemptible minority, featured in Mussolini's plans for aggression against the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Local Slovenian priests and the population, especially the elderly, who spoke only the local Slovenian dialect, struggled against this prohibition sustained by the provincial Fascist leaders and by ecclesiastical authorities (Nazzi 1995). In brief, Slovenian language and culture had to be erased, starting with the symbolic space of rituals defining the lifecycle and the course of the year, and the imposition of a single language in schools, a language unknown to children and their families. Italianization also meant that better-paid jobs were available only to "Italian" people. In Trieste, in Gorizia, and in the Julian March, the imposition of Fascism and Italianization were more violent, but these valleys also knew the legacies of violence generated by the dual traumas of Fascism and communism in the twentieth century.

Prior to the Second World War, the Natisone valleys were not divided by a border. This is where competing views of identity were introduced, envisioning the region as a "pure" Italian land, not characterized by ethnic and linguistic diversity. In Topolò/Topolove the border marked since 1947 has replaced a historical memory with another one: previously, you could walk for days from Topolò without encountering a border. Above all, the border has created differences where there were none before, and it has shaped mutual stereotypes and sometimes even serious racist attitudes toward the Slovenian minority living here. It was in these valleys that *Gladio* operated – a secret armed organization meant to defend local Italian identity against the ethnic and political Yugoslav "threat." This was a paramilitary group born in 1946 and named *Organizzazione O*, later recreated as *Gladio* in 1956. The apex of its activity occurred in 1948, during the first democratic elections in the newly born Italian Republic. This happened because of the fear of a possible political victory by the leftist parties, and in order to control the eastern border in a "hidden but alert" (*occulta ma vigile*) manner. In 1948 there were approximately a thousand armed men in the Natisone valleys. This group concealed secret stashes of weapons, and when the group membership lists were made public in November 1990 a serious outcry was raised (Petricig 1997). The new border was an overdetermined configuration of meanings, privileging Italian identity, coming to dominate and subordinate alternative understanding of places. A fear of being overwhelmed (Linke 1999)² and an anxiety of inundation from the margins point to parallel processes by which notions of frontiers were created in the Natisone valleys – "the idea of the *frontier*, the border, the geographic place where opposing nations met and confronted each other, the setting for the colossal and daily struggle between nations" (Judson 1996: 394–395). Today an informal group continues to proclaim that the valleys of Venetian Slovenia (Ital. *Slavia Veneta* or *Slavia Italiana*, Sln. *Benečija*) have always been Italian, and that Slavic people are living there only accidentally. This testifies that the groups have complex relationships with the centers of power, particularly in historical production. In addition, differences such as political affiliation, class, and gender divide these communities at times.

As Donnan and Wilson (1999: 4) note, "anthropologists in general have had much more to say about the cultural and symbolic boundaries between groups, than about the concrete, physical borders between them." The case of Topolò brings into sharp focus the ways in which some current theoretical formulations of both borderlands and hybridity draw heavily not only on linguistic models (see Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia*, or the syncretism informing creolization), but also on organic or racial models.

Topolò is not a creolized world. It did not experience a *diaspora*, as did the Julian March, but just emigration (especially for mining jobs in France and Belgium in the 1950s) as an

² The Trieste lawyer and writer Giorgio Bevilacqua offers an extreme example of the desire to protect the boundaries of Italian national identity from the polluting threat of the Slovenian "race." He writes that "the Slavic people constitute an immense tide [*maree*] that, permeated by a constant ferment, is marching toward the west" (1991: 11).

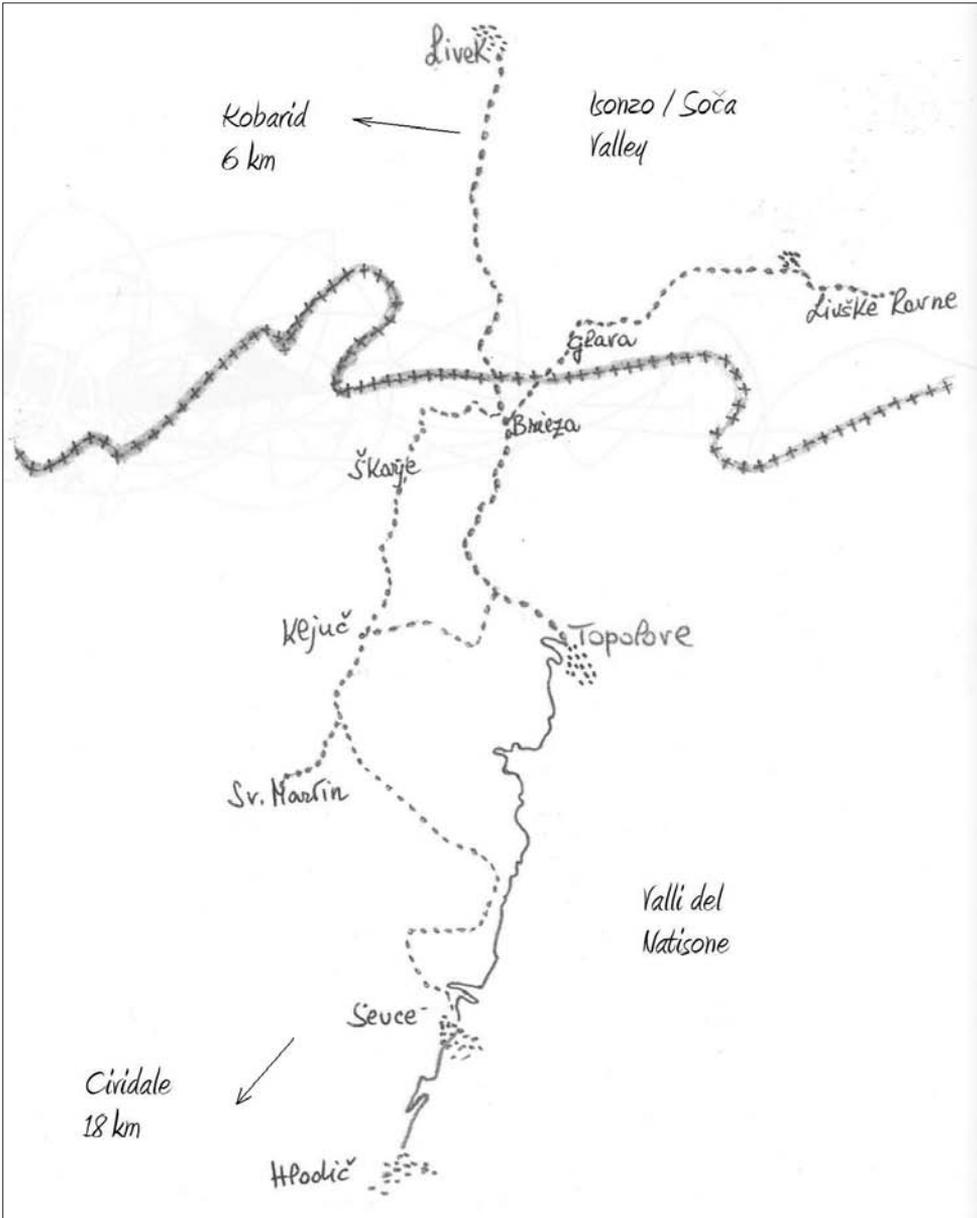
aftermath of economic marginality. Its ethnic identity (I dislike this expression because it often hides a complex dynamic of powers) has been under attack since Fascist times, but the residents are in fact Italian citizens.

There remain many important stories to be told about the Cold War and how different groups lived it. What follows represents the first part of a study on how the eastern border has been perceived by three generations, from 1947 to 2007. I deliberately chose this small community because I wanted to be able to understand some of the transformations linked to the Italian-Slovenian border in a place that remained separate from the bloody political vicissitudes after the Second World War, but where the border had nevertheless affected daily life. I collected a total of twelve in-depth interviews: four interviews with people over sixty, four interviews with people between thirty and sixty, and four among persons younger than thirty.

The personal histories of the elderly people and their relatives intersect with the major currents of twentieth-century European experience: nationalism and state building, the Second World War, the confrontation between Fascism and communism, the Cold War, and its end.

I am carrying out the second part of the study by collecting interviews on the Slovenian side of the border, in the Soča Valley. Finally, Topolò/Topolove, was not a random choice: for more than ten years, every July a contemporary art workshop has been held in this village. Artists from various European countries stay there for a few weeks and create installations that then remain in the village, many of which are inspired by the border. This fact facilitated Topolò's access to EU funding, thanks to which many abandoned houses have been repaired and restructured, some of them transformed into vacation accommodations. This has helped Topolò avoid becoming a ghost-town through depopulation, as has happened to so many other villages in the area, as the film *Ricuciture di memorie / Sešivalnica spomina* (Binding Memories) by Anja Medved and Nadja Velušček (2006) documents along the entire Italian-Slovenian border area.

Some brief information about Topolò/Topolove: this village lies 580 meters above sea level in the Cosizza (Sln. *Kozca*) Valley, one of the four valleys of the Natisone (Sln. *Nadiža*) River in Venetian Slovenia (*Benečija* or *Slavia Italiana*, as called by some Italian scholars). The village remained somewhat marginal with respect to Slovenian settlement of the Natisone valleys between the eighth and tenth centuries. In 1660 there were about fourteen families in Topolò/Topolove, totaling 100 inhabitants; in 1921 the population reached 400, and 450 in 1945. After the Second World War a rapid depopulation process started: temporary emigration became permanent (to France, to Belgium for mining, to Australia, and to Canada), and some others chose to move to neighboring urban areas or down to the plains. Today the village has 40 inhabitants, mostly elderly. The depopulation factors are multiple all along this part of the border between Italy and the former Yugoslavia, and include poverty and the absence of economic development, schools, markets, and industries, which are located in larger cities far from the valleys. The Cold War border here



Map of the Italian-Slovenian border (D. Cozzi).

is an interstitial space (Das and Poole 2004), a *Zwischenraum* or "space between" (Berdahl 1999), where the people living near it are compelled to lead silent lives, without needs or a destiny, nurtured by a reciprocally built fear, forgotten by both countries, testifying to the reality of the frontier's heaviness. Memories, kinship, and friendship ties on both sides of the border came unraveled.

A book titled *Topolò/Topolove* (Gariup, Gariup, and Rucli 1994) presents a historical overview, in both Italian and Slovenian, of how the people managed to escape ethnic polemics about identity by establishing their belonging to a common memory in family genealogical histories. The most controversial historical events of the Fascist period and following the Second World War are absent, and conflicts have been avoided in an attempt to bind together a divided memory.

TERRITORY AS AN AMPUTATED BODY

Maria,³ a young friend from Topolò/Topolove that facilitated my contacts there, had warned me that the border was a sensitive topic of discussion for many of the elderly, even after so many years. Their stories offer the opportunity to reconstruct the benchmarks of building up a contrasting ethnicity, starting from the Fascist period. As already mentioned, the first means of Italianizing the area was forbidding the inhabitants to speak the local Slovenian language. In 1933 the clergy were no longer allowed to offer mass and teach the catechism in the local Slovenian dialect; this was done with the connivance of the bishop and the Udine Diocese, even though the Slovenian dialect was the dominant language in the entire area. However, the same situation was reproduced after the war: some young people were jailed, guilty because somebody had heard them speaking Slovenian among themselves, or for teaching in Slovenian, such as Izidor Predan from Grimacco (Sln. *Garmak* or *Grmak*) in 1953, tried for spying and jailed for having an article published in the Slovenian newspaper *Primorski dnevnik* (Petricig 1997). Renata (76 years old) says that she is on the border between two languages and cultures: she did not know Slovenian well because she could not learn it at school, and she did not know Italian well either because she could not attend school after the first five years of primary education. During her interview, she shifted between Italian and Slovenian, asking Maria to help her to find words and expressions. Lorenzo (72 years old) is very fond of the local language and history. He has published various booklets and is a very much appreciated teller of local legends and stories. They call on him to tell his old stories to children in the schools. Maria warned me that Lorenzo disliked talking about political issues, but his linguistic interests in the interview take the form of an inner, life-long form of resistance, as a means to maintain local identity, as a claim for a value repressed for too long by the Italian authorities, and as an appeal to children not to lose what is left of their linguistic patrimony. Alfredo (81 years old) remembers very well how the village was before and after the Second World War:

*We had no electricity, no road, we got our water from the public fountain with a bucket. During Fascism there was autarchy [he says with a smile].
The public bus to the valley was steam-operated and needed to build up*

³ I have changed all the informants' names to preserve their privacy.

pressure several hours before starting. A certain kind of fabric was made from milk: I bought one of those shirts and when I went to mow the lawn it broke all along the back! It was very bad quality and it didn't last a day!

Alfredo does not speak about forced Italianization; the Fascist rules and claims are presented as ridiculous ones. The elderly tell stories about the war: the battle between the partisans and the Nazis in Topolò in 1943, in which 14 partisans died. They also tell about another episode in 1948 that they said was viewed as a first "battle" between the Italians and Yugoslavs over the recently settled border. There was a shooting and a death, a serious diplomatic accident. However, what was interpreted in local memory as a simple accident between soldiers on the border had a different historical view. It was determined that in reality on 26 April 1948, on Mount Nabries (Sln. *Brieza*) above Topolò, an incident took place between secret Italian army groups and the Yugoslavian Army (Petricig 1997). Both parties gave their own versions of the event, but this revealed the presence of a military group with a new name, the *Volontari Difesa Confini Italiani VIII^o* (Eighth Italian Volunteer Frontier Defense Unit), from which Gladio was subsequently formed. This selective memory (an incident between soldiers vs. secret army groups and Yugoslav troops) gives the impression that the people in Topolò did not feel involved in the border skirmish. "Not in my name," it could be said, emphasizing that citizenship and ethnic identity follow different paths.

Renata says "The people did not want war. We helped either side when they passed through. My in-laws were very sensitive to this sort of thing because my mother-in-law had had a son that went missing in Russia." They remember how the border, which was demarcated by white small poles less than a kilometer from the village as the crow flies, was guarded by troops that they came into face-to-face contact with. Renata says:

The night before they set up the border I was in (Livške) Ravne [on the Yugoslav side of the border]. I was picking potatoes together with other girls, and the people were saying 'At midnight they'll close the border.' But nobody knew exactly where the border was going to be. We were really scared.

All along the border marked in 1947 disbelief was the first reaction of those that were about to be split up. Here, historically, the entities divided by the borders are something as immaterial as the idea of the state. Daily experience was instead comprised of relations, exchanges, and work together in the fields and woods, marked only by property boundaries. The war had ended, and with it the fear of speaking the wrong language and Fascist arrogance, and the dread of helping the rebels, the Partisans that were fighting against a common enemy, had ended as well. The idea of a border set up in an unknown way in only one night was unthinkable. One person remembers anticipating the border with optimism: Anna (73 years old) recalls how her parents had lived under the Habsburg Empire, in which the border represented an opportunity to smuggle salt, tobacco, butter, and cattle. It was a good opportunity to improve their economic situation. It was also unthinkable that the villages on both side of the border, so lively and full of people, would soon be swallowed by nature and oblivion.

From 1947 to 1954 the border was impenetrable. The inhabitants of the village were unable to use their own fields and pastures anymore. The frontier cut off contacts, friendships, family ties, and communal labor, and it was only with great difficulty that these were reestablished after 1954. An invisible wall was built up. The post-border generation has no social links (unless they are very recent ones) with the villages across the border. An imaginary and illogical line was drawn without following the mountain ridge or a watercourse. There was no border crossing between Topolò/Topolove and Yugoslavia. In order to find a crossing, one needed to go to the Rieca/Reka valley, about 10 kilometers away, closer to Kobarid. The border began to shape the destinies of this generation and the next. People's stories sound like small epics about the border, with their own leitmotifs: the neighbor that becomes an enemy and the building of differences. People in the village became ashamed of their origins, starting with their last names; we are not Slovenian, some people said, our family is from Hungary, or something more exotic and farther from the contemptible neighbor. To be a Slovenian from Venetian Slovenia (*Benečija*) was shameful, and this traced inner borders within the village community.

The Yugoslav soldiers that were sent to guard the border were from all across Yugoslavia, and so they did not speak Slovenian. It is said that they were given special leave if they could catch people illegally crossing the border. "You had to be sure not to cross the border, otherwise they could shoot at you," Renata recalls. "Those were Serbians, you had to be careful, they didn't understand you," adds her son Paolo (50 years old). Other story themes include a hunter that succeeds in catching his prey but accidentally ends up on the other side of the border, tricks for sending animals to graze beyond the border line, and the fear of accidents on the border. The rhythm of the stories is marked by repetition of the most feared order: *Stoj! Stoj!* 'Halt! Halt!'

For Anna and Renata, the border most of all meant the loss of communal labor with villagers beyond the frontier, having all movement watched, and the constant preoccupation that the children might cross the border when they were working in the fields; for Lorenzo, the border became a metaphor of a forced isolation begun during Fascism, an element of deculturation that needs to be recuperated today before it is too late. However, it is Alfredo that utters the most striking sentence: "We were left like somebody that had a part of his body amputated."

This metaphor of territory conceived as a body, artificially divided from what was perceived as its wholeness, shows the depth of suffering cause by the division. Territory, "the political recalibration of geographical space" (Berezin and Shain 2003: vii), is an extremely emotional concept for many political communities because it is a frame for social and political life that is experienced daily, a site and symbol of group membership, and the literal landscape of culture and community. Territory is part of the experience of the everyday in borderlands:

territory has four experiential dimensions that fuel thicker attachments than its purely formal components would suggest. Territory is social because,

independent of scale, persons inhabit it collectively; political because groups fight to preserve as well as to enlarge their space; and cultural because it contains the collective memories of its inhabitants. Territory is cognitive as well as physical, and its capacity to subjectify social, political, and cultural boundaries makes it the core of public and private identity projects. Emotion is a constitutive dimension of territory. (Berezin 2003: 7, emphasis in original)

The interviews with the elderly people develop into stories of life that go beyond my research goals. Alfredo smiles, recalling his own and his friends' emigrations, and states that the way of emigrating at that time was not so different from the way people emigrate clandestinely today. Recall that more than three hundred men emigrated from these valleys to work in Belgian and French mines. Some of them were killed in mining accidents and never came back. Lorenzo tells about his sisters that emigrated to Australia in the 1960s, where they still live. Italy, their homeland, is considered far away, demanding, and abstract. Although the government was careful to watch the border in the past by setting up a station for the *Guardia di Finanza* (military financial police) and soldiers in the village, it was not until 1953 that an asphalt road was built to link Topolò/Topolove with downhill areas.

In 1954 residents were granted the right of cross-border passage with a pass (*prepustnica*), mainly to facilitate agricultural work. People began to go to Slovenia more often.

THE INNER BORDER

At the beginning of the interview, Paolo was very distrustful towards me. He asked for more information on the reasons for my questions, my research goals, and who would read it. "More than a border as we conceive it now, it was a different world there," he says. "For so many years in our lives we had never been to Slovenia. The border was an imaginary wall; you would think there was an ocean in between." Maria (43 years old) speaks about the omnipresence of the border. It was a tangible presence but at the same time something you could not "look at." When she was a child she had been very impressed by the fact that it was not possible to take pictures along the border. Therefore you could not take pictures of Topolò either; for example, to make postcards for emigrants from the village. It was as if you could not even look at the mountains around the village. Maria says:

We were going to mow towards Mount Brine, where the border is; I was going there with my mother. We needed to go down the hill to get water. And while I was going downhill towards the border there was always the fear of 'who knows who I'm going to meet there?' There were soldiers, even though I couldn't see them. I was scared.

Livek, the village on the other side, has the colors of a world that, precisely because it was prohibited, seems nicer: you could see the lights, the red roofs, so beautiful; it seemed far and unreachable. Even when it was easier to cross the border, "passing the frontier made me feel uncomfortable, I was anxious. I had to learn how to go shopping on the other

side,” says Maria. The border became an inner dimension. People experienced the border as a mental and physical strain. Paolo, Maria, Anna, and Giulio attended primary school in Topolò/Topolove, between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1970s, when there still were enough children to justify keeping the school open. Giulio (47 years old) says “They never spoke about those things at school. They avoided the issue, they were ashamed, nobody dared speak about the Partisans around here. Everybody wanted to forget.” Maria Grazia says she felt more discrimination when she was at the secondary school in San Pietro al Natisone (Sln. *Špeter [Slovenov]* or *Špietar*), the main settlement in the valleys. She was in a boarding school because it was nearly impossible to come and go from the village with the transportation means of the time. At school it was forbidden to speak Slovenian during the break, and whoever came from “the mountains” was treated differently from the others; they were teased and insulted. Paolo thinks that they took all the boys from the mountains and that they sent them to study elsewhere, not only as a form of educational assistance but to purposely distance them from their place of origin and from their culture. These “native” self-understandings reflect the mechanical and essentialized representation of the Slovenians by the speakers of Italian and Friulian in the area. Paolo also explicitly accuses the Mountain Community Authorities of the valleys of being responsible for the lack of development in the area in the 1980s, and speaks about his own personal experience with a cooperative set up in 1980 whose aim was rearing sheep and linking agriculture with tourism. “There still was a lot of political tension, and my father went to buy sheep in Mostar. We needed permission from our Mountain Community Authorities, but they never gave us an answer, they never gave us a cent, despite all the public funds they were receiving.” Not only because of this, but also because of all his trips across the border, Paolo was looked at suspiciously; some people thought he was a spy. These were the times when Gladio was on the main news; a secret Italian anticommunist organization, later considered subversive. Sheep become a political issue for bordering countries. After five years, because of the lack of support, this initiative had to be abandoned. Maria says “We were considered ‘different’ even by the people from the neighboring town of Cividale, just because we were living on the border.” Discriminating attitudes are witnessed by various episodes. In the following years Maria started working as a nurse at the hospital in Cividale (Sln. *Čedad*). Maria realized that her classmates at the nursing school were ashamed to speak Slovenian because this would clearly indicate where they came from, an area that was synonymous with poverty, ignorance, and “being communist.” She remembers how a colleague verbally abused her, shouting in the corridor, referring to her with the Friulan epithet *sclavate* ‘worthless Slav’. Paolo says: “more than the ‘border syndrome,’ we had a ‘two-border syndrome’: the border above the village, and another border starting in Ponte San Quirino” (Sln. *Pri mostu* or *Muost*); this settlement and the bridge there marks the entrance to the Natisone valleys.

The border icon (Herzfeld 1997) shows two aspects that are apparently antithetic (closure vs. openness, visibility vs. invisibility, and citizen vs. stranger), but they are both

functional for constructing the mutual national identities (the importance of defending the borders and defending Italian identity and the regional issues, in the case of the Italians), as well as presenting the dynamics between the dominant state and the minorities. For Herzfeld (1997), investigating "cultural intimacy" means looking at the stereotypes that official culture tends to hide in order to control its own public image and the space over which people build their reassuring feeling of the belonging to a community. Everyone tends to remove those aspects of cultural identity considered embarrassing of front of strangers, but with group members they allow the certainty of a shared sociality that is central to national character. The Italian-Yugoslav border became an embodiment of the states and ethnic groups politically, economically, and symbolically. The Natisone valleys show the presence of a contrastive cultural intimacy, about the ways in which marginality within the state is continually reproduced.

Finally, I examined what people born after 1980 think about the border. Maria (17 years old) and Stefano (20 years old) live in Topolò/Topolove throughout the year, whereas Antonio (23 years old) and his family go to their house in Topolò/Topolove only on the weekends. During the rest of the year they live in a village in the valley. The same is true of Marco (25 years old), whose grandparents live in Topolò, although he seldom visits them. They all look ahead. They are aware of the burden the border imposed on their parents' and grandparents' lives; however, like other young people their age, they feel part of a Europe without borders. They speak Slovenian at home, but this is the language of intimacy, which they do not use for other social purposes. They feel involved in initiatives to reveal and refresh local history and traditions, but their attitude towards the culture and the identity of the valleys is characterized by disenchantment: they feel part of a composite identity. They suffer a bit from isolation because of the geographical position of the valleys and are afraid that the fragile economy of the valleys might be destroyed by economic dislocation. Their concerns are the same as those of all young people that live in the mountains or in economically marginal areas of Friuli. They are moving forward and they are being watched by the previous generations with the hope that they will be able to preserve the past, but also with the fear that the cultural heritage of the valleys might fade away. They see the border as being just like the metal monster that brandishes his claws towards the sky and the woods: a rusty relic that serves as a warning not to repeat the past.

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»NOTRANJA MEJA«.

MEJE, PRIPOVEDI IN KULTURNA INTIMNOST V TOPOLOVEM

21. decembra 2007 je dokončno padla ena spornejših in najbolj luknjastih mej v Evropi, tista med Slovenijo in severovzhodno Italijo, in omogočila vključitev Slovenije v schengensko območje. Nekdanja meja med nespravljivima svetovoma – Vzhodom in Zahodom – je bila od 80. let preteklega stoletja ena najprehodnejših mej med dvema Evropama. Ikoničnost meje (Herzfeld 1997) predstavlja navidez nasprotujoči si strani, ki poudarjata razmerje zaprto–odprto, tako v funkcionalnem pogledu kakor z vidika obeh narodnih identitet in dinamike med nacionalnima državama in manjšinama. Ne gre za primer, da so slovenski ljudje, naseljeni ob meji med območjem Benečije Julijske krajine in Slovenije, opredeljeni kot »etnična manjšina«. Izraz je zgoščen in poln nasprotij, če ga opazujemo v bližini meje, in povsem brez pomena za pogled iz Rima ali Neaplja. Meja, postavljena leta 1947, je vas Topolò/Topolove odrezala od Soške doline – njenega naravnega kmetijskega in tržnega območja. Fašistična strategija italijanizacije Nadiških dolin se je začela leta 1931 s prepovedjo rabe slovenskega jezika v šolah in pri cerkvenem obredju. Preprosto, slovenski jezik in kulturo je bilo treba zbrisati. Takšen odnos do slovenske manjšine se je nadaljeval po drugi svetovni vojni.

Predstavljam pripovedi treh rodov iz let 1947–2007, ki so z mejo živeli na različne načine. Zbranih je bilo 12 poglobljenih intervjujev, da bi razumeli, kako so ljudje doživljali vzhodno mejo. Osebne zgodbe starejših ljudi in njihovih sorodnikov se prekrivajo z glavnimi tokovi evropskih izkušenj v 20. stoletju: z nacionalizmom in graditvijo narodov, drugo svetovno vojno, hladno vojno in njenim koncem. Po drugi svetovni vojni je prišlo ob meji do hitrega procesa depopulacije: število prebivalcev v Topolovem se je s 450 zmanjšalo na današnjih 40. Številni moške so se kot rudarji izselili v Belgijo in Francijo. Pred določitvijo meje leta 1947 so bile dnevne izkušnje vaščanov ob meji stiki, menjave, skupno delo na poljih in v gozdovih; določale so jih le meje lastnine. Ko je bilo vojne konec, je bilo konec tudi strahu pred govorjenjem v napačnem jeziku, pred fašistično aroganco, strahu pred pomočjo upornikom, partizanom, ki so se borili proti skupnemu sovražniku. Misel na mejo, postavljeno na nepoznan način v eni sami noči, je bila nezamisljiva. Meja je bila med letoma 1947 in 1954 neprehodna, kakor nevidni zid. Med Topolovim in Jugoslavijo ni bilo nobenega prehoda in ljudje niso mogli več uporabljati svojih lastnih njiv in pašnikov. Pretrgala je stike, prijateljstva, družinske vezi, delovne menjave. Alfredo, starejši mož, pravi: »Pustili so nas kakor nekoga, ki so mu odrezali kos telesa.« Podoba območja, doživetega kot ranjeno telo, umetne zareze v to, kar so ljudje imeli za celoto, kaže na globino boleče razdelitve. Za generacijo, rojeno po letu 1947, je bila meja dejstvo, imaginarni zid, nekaj, česar ni bilo mogoče »gledati«, saj je bilo slikanje na meji prepovedano. Meja je postala

notranja razsežnost, duhovno in fizično breme. Občutek diskriminiranosti je oblikoval izkušnje te generacije, diskriminacijski odnos Italijanov potrjujejo različna dejanja. Tudi ko je postalo lažje prečkati mejo, so se pri tem ljudje počutili nelagodno, zaskrbljeno. Paolo pravi: »Bolj kakor 'mejni sindrom' smo imeli 'sindrom dveh mej': mejo nad vasjo in mejo, ki se je začela na kraju, ki označuje vhod v Nadiške doline.« 'Domače' samorazumevanje izraža mehanično in esencionalizirano podobo, ki so jo imeli o njih italijanski in furlanski govorci na tem območju. Ljudje, rojeni po letu 1980, gledajo naprej. Zavedajo se bremena meje za njihove starše in stare starše. Doma so govorili slovensko, vendar je to jezik intimnosti, ki ga ne uporabljajo za druge socialne namene. Počutijo se vključeni v pobude, da razširijo in osvežijo krajevno zgodovino in izročilo, vendar je za njihov odnos do kulture in identitete dolin značilna streznitev: njihova identiteta je sestavljena. Na mejo gledajo kakor na železno pošast, kakršno so v tednu umetniškega festivala leta 1995 postavili na robu vasi: vilaste okončine vihti proti nebu in gozdu – zarjavel ostanek, ki opominja, da preteklosti ne gre ponavljati.

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