

## Go West! Illegal postwar migrations from the Soča region in the light of a case study

di Urška Strle

### **Abstract – *Go West! Illegal postwar migrations from the Soča region in the light of a case study***

*The article focuses on the life-story of a Slovenian emigrant Stanka that serves as a basis to elucidate the processes of illegal migrations from the western Yugoslavian outskirts towards Italy. The personal perspective enables a more thorough and detailed insight into the massive outflow of Slovenian population in the initial postwar years and intends to upgrade the politicized and ideologically conditioned understanding of the phenomenon. In order to better understand the issue, the text encompasses the time before and after the act of Stanka's flight itself, trying to illuminate all the crucial events in her life that eventually led to or were conditioned by her emigration. Her story is embedded in the family environment and is also contextualized with historical development. Oral history interviews, informative conversations, analysis of various ego-documents and biographical notes are therefore supported with relevant literature from the field of historical and migration studies in order to reconstruct Stanka's migratory experience.*

**Key words:** illegal migrations, Slovenians, Italian refugee camps, life-story, case study.

**Parole chiave:** emigrazione illegale, sloveni, campi italiani per rifugiati, narrazione, studio di caso.

### *Introduction*

I carefully studied when the Yugoslav guards changed shifts, and when it was safe I sneaked across. It was around three in the morning and quite foggy. When I was on the other side, the Italian border guards welcomed me and offered me breakfast. I hadn't told anyone I was leaving. At first, my family thought I had drowned, because the river Idrija had been flooding due to the rain<sup>1</sup>.

The chosen quote introduces the life-story of Stanka Velikonja, which serves as a red line to help elucidate certain aspects of the illegal migrations from Yugoslavia to Italy in the first postwar decade. Stanka was not even 19 years old when she left her family farm, located in the Western borderline area. In the early morning of March 4, 1951, she crossed the border creek Idrija and launched her years-long journey, before she finally settled again – this time in Alberta, Canada<sup>2</sup>. However, the present article tries to reconstruct the part of her migratory experience that begins with a historical explanation of her socio-cultural background and ends with her departure to Canada from a refugee camp in Italy. Such a narrowed focus of Stanka's life-story, that does not focus much on her Canadian experience, is chosen to draw attention to the migratory flows, which embraced more

<sup>1</sup> From Stanka's written answers to my questions put down by her daughter Silvia, sent to me via e-mail in November 2007.

<sup>2</sup> The article proceeds from the chapter in the monograph on women's migration: U. Strle, *Bila je čista sreča, da sem prišla v Kanado: o razlogih za selitve skozi Stankino življenjsko zgodbo*, in M. Milharčič Hladnik, J. Mlekuž, *Krila migracij po meri življenjskih zgodb*, Založba ZRC, Ljubljana 2009, pp. 89-117.

than ten thousand people of Slovenian origin<sup>3</sup>. As a consequence of the politicized East-West conflict, these Slovenian fugitives in Italy were overlooked by thousands of Italian refugees from Istria and Dalmatia, known also as «optants» or «*esuli*»<sup>4</sup>. They attracted a lot of publicity and political attention in Italy and were perceived as predominantly ethnic Italians who had been forced to leave their homes and had opted for Italian citizenship<sup>5</sup>. Numerous Yugoslav refugees (particularly Slovenes, Croats and Serbs) in Italy were presented mainly as former quislings, escaping from home-country for political reasons<sup>6</sup>. Due to the politicized atmosphere the emigrants, driven from their homes for economic and other personal reasons, were mostly omitted in contemporary professional literature on the refugee question. In the works on post-war migrations political aspects clearly prevail. However, in recent decades, a complexity of reasons and multitude of motivations behind their mobility have been accentuated<sup>7</sup>. Refugees were absorbed by socioeconomic needs only feebly. In a much greater part they headed further on, presenting an evident share of post-war emigration wave from war-torn Europe to the Americas. Also although Stanka eventually found her way to Canada, she left her home without a strategy or clear expectations about the future, just wanting to enable herself «a better life» than the one she had left behind. Through her personal experience, emerging from subsequent narrative evaluations, the process of how her (illegal, yet legitimate) migratory decision took shape can be analyzed. Furthermore, beginning with her case study, one can discern elements that pose a challenge inside the stereotypical notions of emigration and emigrants fueled by research on the macro level. Stanka's reconstructed life-story, adds to such dry labels as illegal immigrant elements of «flesh and blood», and thus enriches the understanding of illegal migrations. Many aspects of migration research fail to address the question of why only *some* people emigrate from a given area while others do not, although everybody there was supposedly subject to similar (political and economic) pressures. The question of why individuals opt for a certain destination country often remains unanswered as well. In light of this, I have decided to convey precisely these aspects – the factors that influenced and shaped Stanka's migratory path, which she was able to influence in varying degrees.

<sup>3</sup> N. Troha, *Odseljevanje in prebegi Slovencev z območja, ki je bilo z Mirovno pogodbo z Italijo priključeno k Ljudski republiki Sloveniji*, in P. Štih, B. Balkovec, *Migracije in slovenski prostor od antike do danes*, ZZDS, Ljubljana 2010, pp. 432-446.

<sup>4</sup> The numerical estimation of these migration flows vary from 200.000 to 350.000. Such a rather ample variation stems from difficulties to precisely quantify these refugees, but also from the various methods used to validate their number. Moreover the numbers have been subjects of various politically conditioned assessments over scientific interests. More, C. Donato, *Il Friuli e Venezia Giulia nelle migrazioni di oggi e di un recente passato*, Università degli Studi di Trieste, Trieste 2001, p. 21; P. Ballinger, *Borders of the Nation, Borders of Citizenship: Italian Repatriation and the Redefinition of National Identity after World War II*, in «*Comparative Studies in Society and History*», n. 49 (3), pp. 713-741;

<sup>5</sup> For selected bibliography see: S. Volk, *Ezulski skrbniki: vloga in pomen begunskih organizacij ter urejanje vprašanja istrskih beguncev v Italiji v luči begunskega časopisja 1945-1963*, ZDJP/ZRSRS, Koper 1999; P. Ballinger, *Opting for Identity: The Politics of International Refugee Relief in Venezia Giulia, 1948- 1952*, «*Acta Histriae*», n. 14 (1), 2006, pp. 115-136; Š. Selimović, *Izmedju prava, politike i diplomacije*, Plejada, Zagreb 2015; S. Maranzana, *La patria perduta: I tesori degli italiani in fuga da Tito*, La biblioteca del Piccolo, Trieste 2013.

<sup>6</sup> J. Vernant, *The Refugee in the Post-War World*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London 1953, pp. 88-92.

<sup>7</sup> P. M. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees from the First World War Through the Cold War*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2002; P. Ballinger, *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2003. In addition, Italy offered a shelter to many East-European refugees, depicted as those who escaped the establishment of the Communist regimes. S. Salvatici, *Senza casa e senza paese: Profughi europei nel secondo dopoguerra*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2009.

The explanations of historical events offered by «ordinary people»<sup>8</sup> frequently differ from the official narrative. Moreover, people do not often equate their past (and present) with the official historical accounts. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Stanka's place of birth, which is today part of Western Slovenia, belonged to six different political entities. Up to 1918 the area was part of the Habsburg Monarchy, while immediately after the war it was occupied by the Kingdom of Italy, and in 1920 through the Treaty of Rapallo, was officially annexed to (or handed to) Italy. After Italy's capitulation in World War II in September 1943 the area came under the jurisdiction of the Third Reich, after nearly a quarter of a century of Fascist rule.<sup>9</sup> For two years immediately following the war (1945-1947) it fell under Anglo-American military administration due to the international disagreements over the delimitation of state boundaries. In 1947 it became part of Yugoslavia, and since 1991, it belongs to the Republic of Slovenia. Each of these state formations dictated its own reading of history and interpretation of events. Naturally, local people did not simply accept these official versions, but often shaped their own points of view based on personal experience, hereby contextualizing broader historical processes within their own intimate worlds. In this respect, I follow the insights of the recent oral history methodologies, which equate historical events with the meanings that people have attached to the happening in their lives<sup>10</sup>.

### *On sources and methods*

The present case study was inspired by a written outline of Stanka's life, simply but revealingly titled *The Life and Immigration of Stella and John* and was Stanka's response to my request for assistance as I was preparing my doctoral thesis on Slovenians in Canada. Stanka's late husband Janko Velikonja (1929-1992), the youngest brother of my grandmother Suzana Krivec (1920-2009), was also a post-war emigrant to Canada and one of the first protagonists of my research. Despite being very problematic as a historical source, the eight-page text served as an important draft for my initial understanding of Stanka's migration story. Because I knew little about the life of my distant relatives the text became a starting point, an indication of her migratory passages. Unfortunately Stanka declined my wish to

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<sup>8</sup> I use the term «ordinary people» (often also referred to as «common people») to denote those individuals whose names are absent from political and cultural historical anthologies.

<sup>9</sup> Chosen relevant literature presenting the cultural, political and economic status of Slovenian population in the time of Fascism: G. Salvemini, *Racial minorities under fascism in Italy*, The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Chicago 1934; L. Čermelj, *Life-and-death struggle of a national minority (the Yugoslavs in Italy)*, TLP, Ljubljana 1945; M. Kacin Wohinz, *Vivere al confine: sloveni e italiani negli anni 1918-1941*, Goriška Mohorjeva družba, Gorizia 2004; M. Verginella, *Il confine degli altri: la questione giuliana e la memoria slovena*, Donizelli, Roma 2008; E. Pelikan, *L'attività clandestina del clero sloveno durante il fascismo*, Kappa Vu, Udine 2011; B. Pahor, *Figlio di nessuno: un'autobiografia senza frontiere*, Rizzoli, Milano 2012.

<sup>10</sup> The renowned oral historian Alastair Thompson emphasises the meaning of personal histories and experiences in evaluating the past processes from the migratory perspective. He's among many arguing that oral history had a significant impact upon migration, ethnic and labour studies. The migrant narratives however enriched the oral history methodology in emphasising the importance of social networks, including an extended familial circles to understand the narrator's points of view. See: A. Thompson, *Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies*, Oral History: Migration, 1999, pp. 24-37. Compare: A. Laperrière, V. Lindström, T. Palmer Seiler, *Immigration and ethnicity in Canada*, Association for Canadian Studies, Montreal 1996, pp. 49-59. The latter work used the expression New Oral History, which emerged in the 1990s and turned to the narrative as a subjective account. The subjectiveness of story-telling was recognized as a useful tool to comprehend how people understand and evaluate the processes in the past and the present.

record a conversation with her, so I consequently possess no tangible accounts of her own. However, during my 3 week stay at her place in Edmonton, we had had a lot of conversations on which I conducted my impressions and explanations. I occasionally used the *story* only to illustrate those moments of her life, which were confirmed by other references. However, my representation of her story is based on a variety of sources, including oral ones. The afore mentioned *story* was written by Stanka's youngest daughter Doris – on the basis of her mother's narration. Such a mediated account presented me with more questions than answers and opened up a whole series of dilemmas about how to conduct the research and writing. The *story* – which is actually Stanka and Janko's love story – indeed provided a chronological perspective of their life courses, highlighted by the most important milestones of their lives. However, the narrative of the story quickly weaves together the fates of these two people and from there on they appear as a couple, as is evidenced by the frequent use of the phrase *Janko and Stanka/John and Stella*<sup>11</sup>. Since this «coupled» narrative in many respects veils Stanka's distinctiveness, it would be difficult to isolate her personality using only this *story*. The narrative of the *story* is coloured by the optimism and the absence of unpleasant episodes. I also came across a euphemistic attitude when talking to Stanka in person, which is not surprising. In discussing the filtration of memory, Primo Levi observes that people «while talking about their past tend to dwell on the breaks, the moments of relief, and the grotesque, strange or relaxed pauses, while skipping over the most painful events. We do not like to bring them out from the depths of our memory and thus they gradually become foggy and blurred»<sup>12</sup>. As with Stanka, the remark about the optimism inherent in her narrative applies also to the writer of the story, her daughter Doris. Ultimately, she chose the events and placed their interpretations within her own framework, which surely influenced the nuances of her mother's narration. The fact that the *story* has been conveyed through the mediation of a third party raises the issue of the extent of its resultant transformation in regard to emotional expressiveness, emphases and narrative flow. As her *daughter*, Doris was likely familiar with various episodes from the lives of her parents. But as it is often the case, through communicating their experiences, parents attempt to influence desired patterns of behaviour and ideals in their children, while also withholding facts that may be negatively perceived by their environment or by the children themselves. Doris' remark that her parents never shared their troubles with their children sheds additional light on the affirmative nature of the *story*. This was revealed to me only later on, when I asked Stanka's elder daughter Silvia, a trained psychologist, for additional help. Her answers to my questions were less monochrome and far less romantic. Stemming from Silvia's answers and our face-to-face conversations, Stanka and Janko remained a very connected and loving couple, but the answers also revealed how they were named DPs as newcomers in Canada and how they encountered troubles and prejudices in post-war Canada. Lack of social and economic stature is a well-known and rather universal experience of migrants, more so for refugees. Talking to other family members (my grandma/her sister-in-law Suzana Krivec, both of Stanka's daughters and Stanka's grandson Michael John), personally and through available correspondences, including numerous e-mails, helped me understand Stanka's life-story much better. In regard to their role as informants, I should mention also Stanka's peers and fellows from the Soča/*Isonzo*

<sup>11</sup> In this article I refer to them by the original Slovenian names as to Janko and Stanka, while in the accounts, written by their Canadian-born daughters they are named as John and Stella.

<sup>12</sup> P. Levi, *Potopljeni in rešeni* [trad. it., *I sommersi e i salvati*, 1986], Studia humanitatis, Ljubljana 2004, p. 24.

region, who relayed many descriptions of local historic conditions and alerted me to the numerous issues worth considering, and provided me with additional explanations of the value of understanding Stanka's decisions. At the same time, it was interesting to follow their interpretations of the past and observe the discrepancies between these and those of the established history. On several occasions I was met by silence, which indicates a relatively high level of tabooization of certain spheres, especially intimacy; accounts on sexuality, stillborn babies, relations between parents etc. were completely absent or were only hinted at. Frequently, silence reflects topics that within a certain community, especially families, are perceived as indecent, and is thus very communicative about existing values, that seem to be features for Stanka's generation in both spaces, in Europe and across the Atlantic.

I attempted to gain some insight into Stanka's life story through letters exchanged between the Velikonja and Krivec families. The letters were written on the families' behalves mainly by the two sisters-in-law. After his marriage Janko gradually stopped writing to his sister Suzana. On the face of it, the preserved correspondence between Stanka and Suzana made available to me, appears purely formal. They exchanged letters on occasions they deemed important, such as Christmas, New Year's Eve, Easter and birthdays. The content of the letters, full of standard formulations, indicates that their primary motive was maintenance of the symbolic ties between the two families, rather than personal expression or realistic descriptions of lives' ups and, in particular, downs<sup>13</sup>. The latter, be their illness, unemployment, conflicts or financial troubles in the Velikonja family, about which I learned from other sources, are completely absent from the correspondence. The family photographs and Canadian dollars, which my grandmother regularly received until her death in 2009 are part of a «redacted» story of success and affluence in Canada and hint at the decision to emigrate as being the right one. Thus, the risky illegal crossing of the border, which neither Stanka's nor Janko's family approved of, became reasonable. Consequently, the two illegal emigrants gradually regained respect in the eyes of those who stayed in Slovenia. The sparse content of the letters can be explained to some extent as a form of self-censorship meant to evade danger, and particularly in regard to the politics of fear and mistrust<sup>14</sup>. My grandma told me, that she had thrown the first letters from Janko into her wood burning stove in order to hide the evidence of the contact. Also Stanka describes the Yugoslav regime as oppressive, although her narrative reveals a poor knowledge of the political situation.

My conversations with Stanka spanned through January 2008, when I was staying with her and her second husband Alan. I got much information on the side, through spontaneous talks, *ad hoc* clarifications, chit-chats behind the dining table, while taking a walk or by looking at family photos. She was neither fond nor used to being recorded. She spoke to me in a simple colloquial English, a result of long-term socialization in Canada, and from time to time, she reverted to Slovenian. Her marriage to Janko, which lasted only a day short of forty years, also meant that the greater part of communication in her home proceeded in Slovenian, more precisely in the dialect of the Upper Soča Valley. After more than ten years of marriage to Canadian-born Alan, her proficiency in Slovenian has declined to the level

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<sup>13</sup> D. A. Gerber, *Epistolary Masquerades Acts of Deceiving and Withholding in Immigrant Letters*. B. S. Elliott, D. A. Gerber, in S. M. Sinke, *Letters across Borders. The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2006, pp. 141-157.

<sup>14</sup> A. Goldberg, *Reading and Writing across the Borders of Dictatorship: Self-censorship and Emigrant Experience in Nazi and Stalinist Europe*, in *Letters across Borders. The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, a c. di B. S. Elliott, D. A. Gerber, S. M. Sinke), Palgrave Macmillan New York 2006, p. 163.

where she communicates more easily in English; she also uses English when talking to her daughters, who have been socialized in an English-speaking environment. There were some discrepancies between her immediate narrative and the outlines, written by Doris and Silvia. These, among other things, point to a) how the researcher through her presence co-creates the source; b) how the narrative flow is influenced by the setting and the immediacy of the face-to-face communication; and c) the dynamics of memory. Much was conveyed by Stanka's laughter, pauses and elusive phrases such as «you know, this and that...»<sup>15</sup>. Stud Terkel puts it very graphically when he claims that «laughter can be an expression of pain and silence can be a scream. And God knows how many meanings one can ascribe to a smile»<sup>16</sup>.

If oral sources are elusive in themselves, interpreting them proves even more difficult. There is always the chance that the researcher fails to appreciate the hidden complexity of what is being told. A historian's interpretation of these sources is based on intuition and ability to penetrate into the thoughts and stream of consciousness of the narrator. After all, the researcher acts as a «sensitive scientific instrument» introducing interpretations and insights into what is being studied through one's own emotions and thought patterns<sup>17</sup>. However, the article is not a study of oral history, but it offers a similar perspective – it focuses upon the individual and tries to understand one's behavior from the micro- and mezzo-perspective<sup>18</sup>. Thus, the article is rather a case study, which serves to elucidate certain aspect of post-war migrations towards the West *from below*<sup>19</sup>. In order to reconstruct the background of Stanka's migratory routes I decided to combine various methodologies applied in microhistory, migration history, life-course history and local history<sup>20</sup>. Since oral

<sup>15</sup> From the author's notes taken during the conversation with Stanka in Edmonton in January 2008.

<sup>16</sup> A. Thompson, *Interview with Stud Terkel*, «*Oral history*», 2004, n. 32 (2), p. 124.

<sup>17</sup> M. Bloch *Apologija zgodovine ali zgodovinarjev poklic* [*Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien*, 1949], Studia humanitatis, Ljubljana, 1996, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> The necessity of taking into account the mezzo-perspective, that is individual's social network and his local surrounding was emphasised by Monica Boyd, Dirk Hoerder. M. Boyd, *Family and Personal Networks in International Migration: Recent Developments and New Agendas*, in «*International Migration Review*», n. 23/3, 1998, pp. 638-670; D. Hoerder, *Segmented Macrosystems and Networking Individuals. Migration, migration history, history*, a c. di J. and L. Lucassen, Peter Lang, Bern, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Paris, Wien 1999.

<sup>19</sup> History from below as an interesting historiographic concept had first been exposed by Lucien Febvre, a notable French establisher of the «*Annales*» School, in 1932. The concept was developed by Edward Thompson with his influential work *History from Below* in 1966. Initially it dealt with the oppressed, out and down population as an opposition to the Great men (rulers, noblemen, generals, priests, artists etc.) and had a huge impact upon the history of labour movement (notably Howard Zinn). More: J. Sharpe, *History from below*, in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, a c. di P. Burke, Politi Press, Cambridge 2001, pp. 25-44.

<sup>20</sup> The theoretical and conceptual framework used is based upon the following works (in alphabetical order): M. Boyd, *Family and Personal Networks in International Migration*, pp. 638-670; S. Caunce, *Oral history and the local historian*, Longman London/New York 1994; H. G. Elder and J. Ziele, *Methods of Life Course Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Sage Publications, New York 1998; C. Ginzburg, *Microhistory: Two or Three Things that I Know about it*, in «*Critical Inquiry*», n. 20, 1993, pp. 10-35; C. Ginzburg, *Sir in črvi. Svet nekega mlinarja iz 16. stoletja* [trad. it., *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del Cinquecento*, 1976], Studia humanitatis, Ljubljana 2010; J. Kok, *Principles and prospects of the life course Paradigm*, in «*Annales de Démographie Historique*», n. 1, 2007, pp. 203-230; G. Levi, *Nematerialna dediščina. Življenjska pot piemontskega eksorcista iz XVII. stoletja* [trad. it., *L'eredità immateriale. Carriera di un esorcista nel Piemonte del Seicento*], ŠKUC/Filozoska fakulteta, Ljubljana 1995. G. Levi, *On Microhistory*, in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, a c. di P. Burke, Politi Press, Cambridge 2001, pp. 97-119; J. and L. Lucassen, *Migration, migration history, history: old paradigms and new perspectives*, Peter Lang, Bern 1999; L. Passerini, *Women migrants from East to West* (eds. L. Passerini et al.), *Gender, Mobility and Belonging in Contemporary Europe*, Bergham Books, Oxford/New York 2008; H. Winge, *Local history*, in *Making a historical culture. Historiography in Norway*, a c. di W. H. Hubbard et al., Scandinavian University Press, Oslo 1995; N. Zemon Davies, *Vrnitev Martina Guerra* [trad. ing., *The Return of Martin Guerre*], Studia humanitatis, Ljubljana 2009.

history significantly influenced historical thinking and writing in general, I took advantage of the influential oral history studies<sup>21</sup> also in my study, despite not using classical oral history procedure in my empirical work. But assuming that the memory is the essential core of oral history, we actually deal with the sources that present intimate media of remembrance, namely oral records, written drafts of narratives, almost fictionalized life-story, inquiries and answers, researcher's notes etc.

As a researcher I'm aware to have significantly contributed to the shape of all the sources counted above. The kinship tie that connects me with Stanka and the fact that she is still alive substantially influences the structure and content of this article. Like all of us, our informants, too, harbour a hidden field of attitudes and past experiences that inadvertently «escape» narration. Given that Stanka cooperated with me on *my request* and that I am from her original, yet distant country *Slovenia* and therefore technically a *foreigner*, albeit *her first husband's kin* on my mother's side, it is plausible that all of these factors contributed to the resulting orientation and dynamics of her narrative. These facts imply certain advantages, as well as limitations. Kinship proximity affords me a better understanding of certain aspects of her life, while at the same time my familial relation is undermined by the possible assumption that I am less neutral and more inclined to judge. In her eyes, as the first relative on Janko's side to have visited Stanka's family in Canada, I could be perceived as a sort of an examiner of her life on behalf of relatives and acquaintances from her country of origin, among whom weak, mostly formal connections have existed. Since I informed Stanka that her story will be made *public*, this, too, should be considered as determinative, although it would be wrong to assume that it must necessarily have a limiting effect. It often happens that people more easily and comfortably convey their memories, experiences and the role of their lives to someone they have never before met and do not live with<sup>22</sup>. Stanka's narrative was most likely conditioned by her sense of social desirability, compatibility with her own values and a desire to be appreciated as a unique individual. However, in Stanka I recognize an individual who presents as an allegedly unimportant actor in the macro-perspective, yet offers interesting insights and research perspectives, if we examine her life-course. Moreover, as Giovanni Levi elegantly puts it, «in the interspace of stable or emerging normative systems collectives or individuals play out their own important strategy, that occasionally leaves a durable mark on political reality. Their strategy cannot eliminate the forms of domination, but it can determine and change them»<sup>23</sup>. Once observed closely, Stanka no longer appears powerless, but rather as an active player of her life and one of the creators of our times.

The micro-historical perspective enables observation of the interaction between global events and processes on the one hand and local structures of everyday life on the other. At the same time it alerts us to the fact that laws and general concepts, which are introduced into interpretation of the past from above, do not always reflect reality, but often imply just the opposite, indicating how things should have been. A view from below highlights a

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<sup>21</sup> R. Perks and A. Thompson, *The oral history reader*, Routledge, London/New York 2005; A. Portelli, *The battle of Valle Giulia: oral history and the art of dialogue*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1997. A. Portelli, *So Much Depends on a Red Bus or Innocent Victims of the Liberating Gun*, in «*Oral History: War Memory*», n. 34/2, 2006, pp. 29-43. A. Thomson, *Moving Stories: Oral History and migration studies*, «*Oral History: Migration*», n. 27/1, 1999, 24-37; P. Thompson, *A voice of the Past: oral history*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York 2000; L. Passerini, *Ustna zgodovina, spol in utopija*, Studia Humanitatis, Ljubljana 2008.

<sup>22</sup> N. Visočnik, «Čustva nas in onih»: *Raziskovanje pregona koroških Slovencev*, in «*Etnolog*», n. 14, 2004, p. 113.

<sup>23</sup> G. Levi, *Nematerialna dediščina*, cit., p. 12. The quote translated by the author.

frequently overlooked niche – the choices of individuals, who often exploited precisely the inconsistencies of normative (social and political) systems and designed their life strategies around them. It transcends a simplified understanding of the past and offers new interpretive categories and epistemological starting points, which reflect the complexity of social reality. Lack of depth may obscure causal relations and less obvious, but nonetheless important factors, which researchers have not taken into consideration. An analysis of the social reality behind processes can shed light on elements that from a macro perspective may have appeared as non-personal, while a micro perspective stays closer to human experience.

### *At the family farm*

I wanted a better life. I wanted the freedom to buy better clothes, shoes, groceries. I did not like the place where I was living, living conditions were poor. I wanted the freedom to make choices as to where to live, where to travel. I wanted choices in the ability to find a job and did not like restrictions on my lifestyle<sup>24</sup>.

Stanka's first home was located in the small settlement of Podravne, where today, only three ruined buildings covered in ivy and bramble remain. The settlement was built in a remote location, a few kilometres from the spread-out mountain village of Kambreško, on the steep left bank of the creek named Idrija. «If you throw a stone into the ravine from the yard of the homestead, it will roll into Italy», my grandmother Suzana explained to me once. The wider area of this once much less forested region, riddled with deep ravines, experienced emigration throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and still does today. Its obstructed border location, hard conditions of peasant life, delayed modernization, remoteness from centres of employment and cultural development are the major causes that after the Second World War have made the region one of the most demographically endangered in Slovenia<sup>25</sup>.

Stanislava, or Stanka, Perkon was born on June 20, 1932 to Frančiška and Valentin Perkon. The house was a home to nine children from the two marriages of Frančiška Perkon, born Bavčar, widow of Štefan Ravnik<sup>26</sup>. The youngest of the children, Stanka lost her mother when she was six. In addition to a house, a barn with livestock and a few beehives, the Perkon family owned around 25 hectares covered by forest, orchards, meadows and arable land. Life was tough, dominated by work, into which children were integrated at an early age. By the time she was ten, Stanka was skilled at cooking, cleaning and taking care of the livestock. Her father Valentin was among those who received a humble pension as a disabled WWI veteran. Receiving money in the form of a pension was not an established practice for the rural population in those days. Locals mostly earned money by selling their produce and products. The Perkon family, too, had enough produce to be able to sell some of it, especially westward to Friuli. During the Italian Fascist rule Stanka spent a little over a year at the Italian elementary school in the neighbouring village of Kambreško. When she was nine years old the Second World War broke out, triggering «a constant fear and great sadness in her life». In her story it is put, that «times were hard with constant gunfire

<sup>24</sup> Written answers put down by Silvia. See footnote 1.

<sup>25</sup> J. Peterka, *Kambreško-Srednje*, Branko, Nova Gorica 2000, pp. 24, 249.

<sup>26</sup> *Status animarum* at the parochial archive in Lig (Kanal).

and bombing, with close friends and family being killed around her<sup>27</sup>». During the war the Perkon family helped the Partisans as much as they could. Her father Valentin was a nationally conscious Slovenian and himself a Partisan. His daughter Helija (Stanka's step-sister), together with six other medical personnel, looked after the wounded in a mobile military hospital Lidija that was set up in Podravne<sup>28</sup>. On several occasions Italian soldiers patrolled the area. Jelka Peterka mentions that in mid-February 1944 German soldiers came to the Perkons' homestead as well, seized a 250 kg pig from the barn and took it away with them<sup>29</sup>. Stanka similarly told her daughter, «how German soldiers would force their way into their home, taking what little food they had, along with all the chickens and pigs to feed their own soldiers. Many of the girls were also taken to the German camps where they were forced to cook for the soldiers and would be sexually assaulted»<sup>30</sup>. The uncertainty and danger of the times put fear in her heart, which she says is still with her today. In general, Stanka did not wish to talk much about her childhood and the war. The experience of the war left a deep scar on all of Europe's population and the loss, fear and general deprivation made almost everyone a loser in the aftermath. The effects of economic devastation and personal tragedy were mixed with the bitter taste of prosperity promised during the war, but not delivered. The period following the war represented economic and social crisis that prolonged from the war years, the consequences of human losses and overwhelming material and immaterial damage. The discontentment with the postwar conditions is noticeable in Stanka's narrative.

Moreover, the testimonies of «ordinary people» often reflect the contradictions in perception of the war and post-war years in regard to the official narrative. That is understandable, for WWII provoked many controversial events that were meddling into a civil war and severely affected the civilian population. Some accounts expose the aspects that were silenced or were subjects of alteration by the post-war Yugoslav regime, which influenced the formation of public opinion. Also the period under the Allied Military Administration (1945-1947) was affected by – roughly speaking – two controversial recollections: that of an unjust foreign administration, but also that of a time of relatively good standard of living and hope for a better future. On the one hand, massive demonstrations were organized in urban centers, criticizing the Allied administration, its relation to the local population and its preference of the Italian authorities over the Communist regime in Yugoslavia. On the other hand the soldiers provided treats, food, clothes and shoes to the locals<sup>31</sup>. I would dare say, that for the population without distinctive political or ideological aspirations the notion of a higher material standard and better survival opportunities sounded more attractive than the current political issues. The presence of well-dressed and well-equipped Allied soldiers who introduced to the local population chocolate, white bread, American cigarettes and other luxury goods, provided the inkling that elsewhere life was better – an important factor to stimulate (at least the thinking about) emigration<sup>32</sup>. According to Stanka, some of the local girls left with the Allied soldiers, expecting a

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<sup>27</sup> From Stanka's story.

<sup>28</sup> J. Peterka, *Kambreško*, cit., p. 108.

<sup>29</sup> Ivi, p. 109.

<sup>30</sup> From Stanka's story.

<sup>31</sup> K. Širok, *Kalejdoskop goriške preteklosti*, Založba ZRC, Ljubljana 2012, p. 141-154; I. Miklavčič-Brezigar, *Spomini naše mladosti. Etnološki pregled povojnih dogodkov na Goriškem*, in «Acta Histriae», n. 6, 1998, pp. 372-374.

<sup>32</sup> U. Strle, «Pustili so vse in odšli čez noč». *Prispevek k ilegalnemu izseljevanju iz Posočja v Italijo po drugi svetovni vojni v luči ustnih pričevanj*, in «Zgodovina za vse», a. XVI, n. 1, 2009, pp. 113-129.

better life<sup>33</sup>. When in September 1947 peace treaties were ratified, the area became part of Yugoslavia. «For two years there was enough of everything», recalled my grandma Suzana in connection to the Allied presence, «but when the troops moved out, poverty struck overnight». I encountered such statements also in everyday conversations with numerous older acquaintances<sup>34</sup>. The lack of work opportunities and shortage of money prevailed generally, and people were cut off from areas across the border, with which they had previously been economically, culturally and socially connected. Similarly the area of Kambreško was cut off from its Friuli surroundings, where the villagers traditionally sold their goods, especially wood<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, ties were severed with day labourers, who also came from Friuli. Before the war Stanka's sister Olga had married and moved to the Friulian village of Gnidovica/Gnidovizza<sup>36</sup>. The new state boundary cut her off from her own family. Similarly, a few hectares of the Perkon family land were left on the Italian side.

Stanka claimed that from an economic standpoint, for many inhabitants of the border zone, the life under Communist rule meant a setback – even when compared to the Fascist occupation. These kinds of statements must be viewed in relation to the fact that today these sources often have a negative attitude towards the Yugoslav regime. Especially during the initial post-war years the regime often acted oppressively, looked unfavourably upon the Catholic traditions<sup>37</sup> and often did not ensure even the bare necessities for life, such as sufficient supplies of food. People associated the regime with post-war deprivation and newly introduced social and ideological norms. Furthermore, it should be noted that during the Fascist occupation my sources were still only children and therefore did not experience its pressures in full. Individuals' personal experiences and present political ideology heavily influence the formation of memory. Another important factor is that Stanka's memory formed also in the Canadian environment, which was averse to the Yugoslavian Socialist regime.

### *Thinking to run*

For about a year I thought about leaving home. We lived right beside the border between Yugoslavia and Italy. After a few months we got to know the border guards, we even talked and knew each other by name. From our balcony we could see the border guards' activities on both sides of the border<sup>38</sup>.

The wider border area of my focus is a meeting point of various ethnic cultures – predominantly of Slavic, Italian and German provenance. It has experienced diverse migration processes over the last two centuries. Daily, temporary or seasonal migration,

<sup>33</sup> Similarly: I. Miklavčič-Brezigar, *Spomini naše mladosti*, cit., p. 374.

<sup>34</sup> Compare: K. Širok, *Kalejdoskop goriške preteklosti*, doctoral thesis, Ljubljana 2011.

<sup>35</sup> A. Malnič, *Solkanski dvolastniki 1945-1952. Jako stara vas na Goriškem je Solkan. Zbornik ob tisočletnici prve omembe kraja*, a c. di Branko Marušič, Krajevna skupnost Solkan, Solkan 2001, p. 235. Also in a conversation with Pavle Gerbec from Ročinj; the sound recording is kept by the author.

<sup>36</sup> *Interview with Klara Gerbec*; the sound recording is kept by the author.

<sup>37</sup> Inga Miklavčič-Brezigar writes that in 1947 celebrating traditional December holidays Santa Claus and Christmas was officially banned for being «unjust and antiquated» and replaced by the institution of Father Frost. At the same time, the persecution of priests and public displays of religion also began. In spite of this, traditional culture continued to exist alongside the new, official culture, see I. Miklavčič-Brezigar, *Spomini naše mladosti*, cit., pp. 382-383.

<sup>38</sup> Written answers put down by Silvia. See footnote 1.

common in agricultural societies, were traditional in the area<sup>39</sup>, while since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there was also a high emigration rate to various European and overseas countries. Modest proceeds from the mountain economy in particular, forced local population to demonstrate a high quota of mobility. In terms of mobility also the Great War turned out to be an important milestone in the Soča region. From the beginning of the war many men, including Stanka's father, were mobilized in the Austro-Hungarian army, which marked a significant change in rural daily life. From late May 1915, when the so-called Isonzo front, eastern section of the Southwestern front, was established by the river Soča (ital. Isonzo), around 100,000 civilians were evacuated or forced to take refuge in the safe areas of both warring states.<sup>40</sup> I came across no information about the fate of the Perkon family during the war, but their estate was most likely evacuated, and the population from the western bank of the Soča river in the Kanal area was taken to the Italian hinterlands. Soon after the breakout of the hostilities the encompassing Kambreško was occupied by the Italian army, which established there a military hospital and general Badoglio's military residence<sup>41</sup>. Thus, the war presents a starting-point of massive refugee waves in the Soča region, that did not stop with the end of the war, but continued throughout the interwar period. Thus during the Fascist regime again more than 100,000 people, predominantly of Slovenian and Croatian origin left Venezia-Giulia<sup>42</sup>. Among those who left their homes in the 1920s and 1930s was also Stanka's half-brother Štefan, who settled in Logatec, Yugoslavia. Moreover, while the Second World War on the one hand restricted the usual migratory paths, on the other triggered various forms of forced migrations, such as internments, deportations, refugee movements and mobilizations. The end of the Second World War similarly brought significant political, ideological and economic changes that influenced waves of migration

<sup>39</sup> Rich historiographical interest in the Italo-Slovene border studies suggests how impactful and sensitive the s. c. Western border question was for the Slovene society. Let me present just a few notable historical works. A. Kalc, *Izseljevanje z zahodnega roba slovenskega etničnega prostora*, in *Slovensko izseljenstvo: zbornik ob 50-letnici Slovenske izseljenske matice*, a c. di M. Trebše Štolfa and M. Klemenčič, Ljubljana: Združenje Slovenska izseljenska matica, 2001, pp. 159-169; A. Kalc, M. Kodrič, *Izseljevanje iz Beneške Slovenije v kontekstu furlanske emigracije s posebnim ozirom na obdobje od 19. stoletja do danes in do prve svetovne vojne*, in «Zgodovinski časopis», 1992, n. 2, pp. 197-209; A. Kalc, *Poti in usode: selitvene izkušnje Slovencev z zahodne meje*, ZDJP, ZRS Koper, NŠKT, Koper-Trst 2002; A. Kalc, *Tržaško prebivalstvo v 18. stoletju. Priseljevanje kot gibalo demografske rasti in družbenih sprememb*, «Annales», Koper 2008; *La storia al confine e oltre il confine. Uno sguardo della storiografia slovena*, a c. di M. Verginella, in «Qualestoria», a. XXXV, n. 1, 2007; M. Kacin Wohinz, J. Pirjevec, *Zgodovina Slovencev v Italiji 1866-2000*, Nova revija, Ljubljana 2000. M. Kacin Wohinz, *Vivere al Confine*, cit. Interesting contributions concerning various historical aspects of the migration processes by the Italo-Slovene border area can be found in the volume *Migracije in slovenski prostor od antike do danes*, a c. di P. Štih, B. Balkovec), ZZDS, Ljubljana 2010. Eleven articles concerning the border area over the last two centuries – written by A. Kalc, M. Fajić, D. Darovec, P. Svoljšak, M. Pahor, A. Vovko, M. Terpin Mlinar, E. Pelikan, G. Bajc, N. Troha, S. Volk, and A. Panjek – present a quarter of all 44 contributions dedicated to elucidate the demographic and migration processes in the Slovenian lands since the Antiquity.

<sup>40</sup> P. Svoljšak, *Slovenski begunci v Italiji med prvo svetovno vojno*, ZZDS, Zgodovinski inštitut Milka Kosa ZRC SAZU, Ljubljana 1991; D. Guštin, *Soška fronta in njeno slovensko zaledje*, in *Velika vojna in Slovenci*, a c. di P. Vodopivec, K. Kleindienst, Slovenska matica, Ljubljana 2005; P. Svoljšak, «Smo ko brez gnezda plašne ptice» (*Alojz Gradnik, Molitev beguncev*). *Slovenski begunci v Italiji in Avstro-Ogrski*, in *Soška fronta 1917-1915: Kultura spominjanja*, a c. di V. Rajšp, Založba ZRC, Ljubljana 2010; P. Svoljšak, D. Fortunat Černilogar, L. Galič, *Tolminsko mostišče II*, Tolminski muzej, Tolmin 2005.

<sup>41</sup> J. Peterka, *Kambreško*, cit., p. 39-40.

<sup>42</sup> M. Verginella, *Il confine degli altri*, cit., p. 63; A. Kalc, *L'emigrazione slovena e croata dalla Venezia Giulia tra le due guerre ed il suo ruolo politico*, «Annales. Anali za istrske in mediteranske študije», n. 8, 1996, pp. 23-60; C. Banko, P. Mouzakis, *Slovene emigration in Argentina in the inter-war period*, Dve domovini 18, 2003, pp. 145-158; G. Bajc, *Josip Vilfan in slovenska emigracija iz Julijske Krajine v Jugoslaviji med obema vojnama*, in *Življenje in delo primorskega pravnika, narodnjaka in poslanca v rimskem parlamentu*, a c. di G. Bajc, UP ZRS, Založba Annales, ZDJP, Koper 2005, pp. 129-142. U. Strle, *Begunke v slovenskem delu Kraljevine (1918-1941)*, in *Dolga pot pravic žensk: pravna in politična zgodovina žensk na Slovenskem*, a c. di M. Verginella, FFUL, Studia Humanitatis, Ljubljana 2013, pp. 159-184.

for years to come. The new border between Italy and Yugoslavia established in 1947 did not represent only a state boundary, but also attempted to impose an ethnic and ideological division. Due to its low level of permeability, the border had a deep impact on individual lives, separating family members and forcing changes in the survival strategies of the local population, which was economically, politically and culturally connected also westwards – to Trieste, Gorizia and Friuli. The area in the immediate vicinity of the border was defined by the high degree of psychological pressure on the population with movement strictly controlled, especially within the 100-metre-wide border zone<sup>43</sup>. Post-war migrations in the wider border area were marked by an array of causes, including ethnic, political, ideological, economic, and others<sup>44</sup>.

After the war Stanka completed Slovenian elementary school in the nearby Kambreško. She received no further education since the family did not have enough money. As well, there was a lot of work at their homestead, where her father was the only male family member who remained. Her brother Angel was in the army and her brother Štefan lived in Logatec near Ljubljana, while her older sisters had married and moved away. Only Stanka, Anica, Zofija and their elderly father Valentin remained on the family property. Gradually, lack of favourable prospects eventually drove away all members of the family, although their reasons for emigrating were not identical and also not reducible to a single (supposedly economic) cause. The decision to emigrate reached maturity in a conversation Stanka and Janko had about their future. The reasons that prompted the young couple to take their chances in the wider world are expressed in Stanka's *story* through the sentence, that *John and Stella knew that somehow, someday they must escape this country for a better life*<sup>45</sup>. A «better life» is a simplified expression, an everyday phrase that may actually reveal a colourful palette of meanings. In the context of emigration, «better life» is mainly understood through an economic prism in reference to higher earnings and standard of living. However, this usage clouds other interpretations which may refer to freedom (of movement, employment, expression, religion, etc.), security, escape from a conflicted, dull and stifling environment, better geographic (climatic) conditions and better education, to name just the most obvious. In the case of Janko and Stella, the phrase is associated mainly with material aspirations, although they were concerned also about the tense sociopolitical situation in Yugoslavia. They saw the possibility of a more dignified life only outside Yugoslavia's borders, although this idea was associated with great risk. And last but not least, the strategy of leaving home in order to have a better life was practised by many in the area, including Stanka's relatives. Thus, the act of emigrating presented an important life pattern. Stanka weighed her departure on both material and immaterial scales for about a year. «You must try to put yourself in my position, she explains through the words of her older daughter Sylvia. In June 1951, I was 19 years old. I was not happy at home, conditions were very poor. There were too many restrictions on freedom. Certainly, because of my age I had an adventurous spirit. Simply put, I wanted a better life»<sup>46</sup>.

This narrative indicates how in her perception various elements for the migratory decision are intertwined and evaluated from a personal perspective. Can we really find those factors that would determine her as a political or economic emigrant in her own lines of reasoning? She did not bother much with the politics nor was she against the

<sup>43</sup> A. Malnič, *Solkanski dvolastniki 1945-1952*, cit., p. 249.

<sup>44</sup> A. Kalc, *Poti in usode*, cit., p. 119.

<sup>45</sup> From Stanka's story.

<sup>46</sup> Written answers put down by Silvia.

regime. Moreover, her family helped the partisan movement during the war. However, the establishment of the border and the consequent restrictions of the movement made Stanka feel oppressed. Several times she mentioned the prohibition of swimming in the border creek Idrija, where she had used to swim as a child, and her feelings of anxiety regarding the harsh social atmosphere. Modest and adverse conditions of rural life furthermore, significantly added to her decision to leave home. However, according to her narration one of the most important reasons that she had contemplated emigration was her restrictive family environment, which imposed on her a certain way of life. She wanted to find paid employment, while her charismatic and authoritative father urged her to marry as soon as possible and to devote herself to the work on the family farm. Her goal was not limited to buying better shoes, clothes and other goods, that is, not limited to improving her life from a material perspective. Her biggest desire was to enjoy greater freedom and the possibility to choose her place of residence, employment and lifestyle in general. This led to a conflict between Stanka and her father, whose authority overrode her personal desires, making her feel that the only solution was to leave home. Her father's wishes also went against those of her boyfriend Janko, who did not want to stay in the countryside either. As Janko's sister Suzana points out, Janko loved to dress up, while due to the poor conditions prevailing in the region he frequently could not even acquire the basic goods. He was upset, for example, when on one occasion he waited almost until morning to obtain a cloth to make trousers, and then in the end was not successful. In Suzana's opinion it was then that he began thinking about leaving. Being the youngest son in his family, he knew he would not inherit the family farm<sup>47</sup>. Stanka contemplated emigration at a time when the border was officially closed. All attempts to cross it were seen as an illegal and punishable act by the authorities, although in practice the border was not completely impermeable. Legal crossings were permitted for those who obtained special permissions on the basis of owning a property on the both sides of the border. However the guards sometimes allowed people to pass also subject to their own arbitrary will<sup>48</sup>. Nonetheless, the criminal nature of illegal crossings and harsh punishments for those who merely expressed the intention to undertake this act conditioned people's suspiciousness and fear. They usually entertained these thoughts in solitude or within a group that was planning to escape. Stanka shared her intentions only with Janko. She seized the moment when other members of her family were not around. The fact that she lived beside the border worked to her advantage. She was familiar with the area, which before the war was not divided by the border. From the balcony of her house she could observe the activities of the border guards, who were acquainted with the locals<sup>49</sup>. When the guards were changing shifts she escaped into Italy. The Italian guards, who knew her by name, according to her own words, welcomed her and offered her breakfast.

The number of people who think about illegally emigrating is often considerably higher than the number of those who actually emigrate. The psychological factors that influence the motivation to emigrate are extremely complex and work in parallel, but often also

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<sup>47</sup> This information was given to me in mid-April 2006 by Stanka's sister-in-law, Suzana Krivec.

<sup>48</sup> The stereotype evidenced by numerous testimonies from those living near the border and present also in a documentary film about life along the Italo-Yugoslavian border titled *Sešivalnica spomina* [trad. ing., *Sewing memory*], directed by N. Velušček and A. Medved 2006.

<sup>49</sup> Interactions between border guards and the local population were quite extensive. Also both Stanka's still living sisters, Zofija and Anica, married border guards.

in contradiction<sup>50</sup>. Testimonies of the migrants reveal that a psychological aversion to emigration is always present. Stanka's life story contains aspects that had an inhibitive effect, especially the separation from friends, family and the familiar; the danger of getting caught and the general uncertainty about the future. It was widely known that caught escapees were arrested and their relatives were usually brought in for interrogation. In the cases of illegal crossings of a larger number of people, the whole community was made to feel the consequences in the form of restrictions and controls on physical movement. When Stanka escaped, her father and her sisters Anica and Zofija were interrogated, but because of her father's good relations with the authorities they did not suffer any penalties. Although Stanka and Janko both contemplated running away, they made their escapes separately. It was safer and simpler that way. Their first goal was to cross into Italy, the thought of Canada had not crossed their minds yet. Stanka's sister Olga lived on the Italian side and Stanka intended to join her and start a new life there. Like many emigrants she, too, set off into the unknown, without a clear strategy. Her ideas oftentimes turned out to be illusory, brought on by lack of knowledge, misinformation and naïve expectations. Moreover, Stanka like many other emigrants did not know whether her stay abroad would be permanent or temporary. A person contemplating emigration usually lacks seeing the big picture in regard to available emigration options.

### *Towards a new home*

Post-war Italy was riddled with over a hundred refugee camps, making it «one of the principle collection points for the displaced of Europe»<sup>51</sup>. Apart from the settlements intended for the Istrian and Dalmatian refugees and the housing for almost half a million refugees from abandoned Italian colonies in North Africa and the Aegean – both groups were of predominantly Italian ethnic origin – there were many transitory refugee camps for the non-Italian refugees. Once on the Italian side of the border, Stanka was treated as a refugee. After being accepted by the Italian guards, she was taken to the police station in Udine where for several days she was under investigation to determine whether she had a criminal record and if she suited a refugee status. It was a systematic procedure, because «criminals», similarly as «quislings» and «traitors» were not eligible for aid under the IRO constitution<sup>52</sup>, and were put in the refugee camps of closed type under the Italian Ministry of the Interior<sup>53</sup>. It should be noted here, that between 1947 and 1951 the administrative position of the refugees in Italy was defined by various agreements between the IRO delegation in Italy and the Italian government; some displaced persons camps were run by IRO and other by the Italian police<sup>54</sup>. At the police station Stanka was informed that the economic circumstances in Friuli were also unfavourable and that it would be better if she went elsewhere. It is a fact that the Italian population suffered from the war to a great extent and that unemployment was high throughout Italy. State officials pointed out that large

<sup>50</sup> L. Eitinger, *Feeling at home: Immigrants' psychological problems*, in *Strangers in the World*, a c. di L. Eitinger, D. Schwarz, Hans Huber Publishers, Bern, Stuttgart, Vienna 1981, pp. 85-86.

<sup>51</sup> M. Marrus, *The Unwanted*, cit., p. 302.

<sup>52</sup> J. G. Stoessinger, *The Refugee and the World Community*, cit., p. 86.

<sup>53</sup> J. Vernant, *The Refugee in the Post-War World*, cit., pp. 190-191.

<sup>54</sup> Ivi, p. 186.

numbers of refugees were «far beyond the country's absorptive capacity»<sup>55</sup>. In archival documents, there is clear evidence that Italian first rank politicians were not favourable to Slovenian and Croatian colonization of the border area, which would allegedly affect the «sensitive ethnic situation in Friuli»<sup>56</sup>. Optants for Italian citizenship of Yugoslav national origin would supposedly «endanger national interests, ethnic and political substance, intensify the question of Slavic minority and even extend their demands»<sup>57</sup>. It must be noted, that of all the national groups, the Yugoslavs formed the majority of the refugees. Consequently Stanka was, like thousands of others Yugoslavs, sent to one of the numerous postwar refugee camps in central Italy and was advised not to stay with her sister Olga. «Meanwhile, a month later in April of 1951, John also had plans to escape to Italy. Before he left, he wanted to visit his sister, Suzana, but could not tell her his plans for fear that someone would find out and he would be shot. He then cautiously fled to Italy, and was sent to camp Frascette where all the other boys were taken by the authorities»<sup>58</sup>. Stanka was sent to Farfa Sabina refugee camp near the town of Rieti, where women and families, altogether 360 persons, were housed under the supervision of the Italian police.<sup>59</sup> While there, she spent some time working as a domestic servant for the family of a military officer, who was obviously satisfied with her work for he offered her a permanent job. She did not wish to stay there, although at the time she was still considering settling in Italy. «Working there was kind of morbid, we were surrounded by barbed wire, it didn't feel nice. Otherwise they were all kind to me», recalls Stanka<sup>60</sup>.

One of the IRO's agreements with Italy in 1950 was to help evacuate 20,000 refugees from Italy, while Italy had to cover part of the expenses<sup>61</sup>. Between November 1950 and December 1951 around 1,200 refugees from the camps at Frascette and Farfa Sabina were transferred to the IRO camps. These were the transfers Stanka and Janko were both part of.

Soon after, the authorities decided to move both of the camps together to another camp near Napoli (Naples), where John and Stella once again saw one another. At this camp John worked as a guard and Stella worked in the kitchen. Stella also remembers being sick with the measles and having to spend a few days in the hospital. When she was well again, she began work as a nurses' assistant and took care of the sick children. She can recall making \$10,000 lira in one month, which barely bought a can of beans. John and Stella would see one another from time to time, and spoke about

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<sup>55</sup> Ivi, p. 183.

<sup>56</sup> N. Troha, *Odseljevanje in prebegi Slovencev z območja, ki je bilo z Mirovno pogodbo z Italijo priključeno k Ljudski republiki Sloveniji*, cit., p. 438.

<sup>57</sup> Ivi, p. 440; documents available at Archivio storico diplomatico del ministero degli Affari esteri; ASDMAE, AP 1946/1950, Jugoslavia, b. 60. A letter of the prefecture of Gorizia to the Ministry of Interior. Regaining of Italian citizenship, 28. 10. 1948. On the other hand Yugoslav administration also often refused requests to opt in order to retain the needed working force. More: P. Ballinger, *Opting for Identity*, cit., p. 117; R. Pupo and A. Panjek, *Oltre l'Italia e l'Europa: ricerche sui movimenti migratori e sullo spazio multiculturale. Atti del Convegno internazionale: Mobilità geografica in Italia: caratteristiche e tendenze, differenze regionali e processi di territorializzazione nella nuova società multiculturale*, a cura di C. Donato, P. Nodari, A. Panjek, Edizione Università di Trieste, Trieste 2004, pp. 346-347.

<sup>58</sup> From Stanka's story.

<sup>59</sup> J. Vernant, *The Refugee in the Post-War World*, cit., p. 191.

<sup>60</sup> From the author's notes taken during the conversation with Stanka in Edmonton in January 2008.

<sup>61</sup> J. Vernant, *The Refugee in the Post-War World*, cit., p. 187.

settling down in Italy. By this time Slovenians heavily populated the area and the authorities suggested they should further immigrate to other countries<sup>62</sup>.

As was the case in the majority of European refugee camps, various international commissions inspected the refugee camp populations. These commissions came from the countries that had decided to accept refugees from war-torn Europe. They also visited Bagnoli, one of the largest IRO displaced persons camps near Naples, where Stanka and Janko were located. From there the commissions recruited emigrants to their countries, especially Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United States, Argentina, and various South American countries. The reasons for these countries to invite refugees to become legal immigrants were manifold. They were following the appeals of IRO and other humanitarian institutions to help the «down and out people», which would eventually raise the receiving countries in the eyes of an international public. However those countries had their own logic of profitability, particularly increasing their national demographic growth, settling the unexploited land and gaining cheap labour force. Many refugees, including Stanka, recalled that many commissions were actually selecting future immigrants according to their physical condition, state of health, moral chastity and ideological conviction; young, single, physically fit and healthy persons were preferred<sup>63</sup>. Chosen refugees were invited to sign a labour contract, according to which they were obligated to work for a certain period (usually for one or two years) for a minimum wage. After fulfilling the contract they were free to start a new life in a new environment and to opt for a citizenship of the receiving country. Stanka and Janko were choosing between Australia, Brazil and Canada and eventually opted for the latter because many of their acquaintances went there and «because it was close to America». Stanka did not know much about Canada: «I was going into an adventure to a country I knew nothing about. It was simply luck that Canada was my destination»<sup>64</sup>.

At first Janko and Stanka planned to get married while still in the camp. However, acquaintances advised them to wait because the Canadian authorities were interested primarily in single persons and frequently turned away families. Stanka claims that if they had been married in Italy, Janko would have had to go to Canada alone, fulfil the year-long labour contract and then vouch for her, also paying for her trip. Therefore, they decided to go to Canada as singles, fulfil their contract obligations and get married afterwards. It took months for them to get all their immigration documentation approved. It was arranged that they travel by train to the port town of Bremen in Germany and from there to Canada by ship. Before their final departure from Europe, they spent a few weeks in a displaced person camp in Bremen. Their refugee status ensured that they did not have to pay for travel expenses, documents or food out of their own pockets. In pursuing its economic interests, Canada had signed bilateral agreements with countries that hosted refugees. All the necessary documents and travel costs were handled by Italian and Canadian officials in cooperation with the International Refugee Organization (IRO) and Inter-Government Committee for European Migration (ICEM)<sup>65</sup>.

<sup>62</sup> From Stanka's story. The salary Stanka mentions seems rather high, for women in Farfa Sabina earned from 100 to 150 a day for working in dressmaking workshops. But a comparison to buy a can of beans for such a sum is definitely an exaggeration.

<sup>63</sup> V. Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates, Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540-2006*, Dundurn Press, Toronto 2007, pp. 166-170; N. Kelley, M. Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic, A history of Canadian Immigration Policy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1998, pp. 311-324.

<sup>64</sup> Written answers put down by Silvia. See footnote 1.

<sup>65</sup> M. Marrus, *The Unwanted*, cit., p. 365.

With very little money, a suitcase each and the clothes on their backs their journey to Canada began. Not yet being married they were not allowed to travel together and were each given separate living quarters. This made for a very lonely 3-week venture. Stella remembers boarding a ship named the “Firesea” on their way to Canada. It was during this time that the Captain of the ship had informed them that this was the worst weather they had ever travelled through. But through the rough seas and loneliness their [Stanka and Janko’s, NdR] love was strong, remembering their promise to one another that they would one day find each other again. On January 7, 1952, they reached the shores of Halifax, Canada. There they were met with Canada’s harsh cold weather. But Stella did not seem to mind; all she could think about was that she was free and she was happy. She did not mind that she could not speak the language, she was so grateful to be in Canada<sup>66</sup>.

## *Epilogue*

In September 1952, Stanka and Janko finally met and got married in Malartic, Quebec, a mining town, where Janko was fulfilling his labour contract obligations. The Albertan environment, where they settled in the mid-50s, enabled Stanka and Janko to lead a life they could not have even imagined in the Upper Soča Valley, their place of birth. By the end of 1954 Janko had already bought a new family house through savings from hard work and favourable mortgage interest rates. The family owned a car, a symbol of North American individualism and independence, and with the exception of a few family financial crises they had enough money for a decent standard of living. Besides, social norms were quite different from the ones in Stanka and Janko’s traditional rural Slovenian communities, especially in regard to the modern patterns of consumption and the relationship between parents and their children. On April 1, 1962 the couple decided to apply for Canadian citizenship and exactly a year later they were sworn in as Canadian citizens. From the legal standpoint April 1, 1963 was the day when they lost their refugee status. They celebrated with all their friends and were «very proud of their Canadian status»<sup>67</sup>. They officially changed their names to John and Stella Velikonja. Simultaneously, an extensive fusion with Canadian society and culture took place through various institutions, friendships with Canadians and immigrants from various ethnic communities, and through adopting Canadian norms and traditions. The Velikonja couple never seriously thought of returning to Slovenia. To my question regarding Stanka’s thoughts about returning, she responded: «Why would I return home, if I wanted to leave that much?»<sup>68</sup>. Despite their acculturation in the Canadian environment, they continued to live with Slovenian traditions. Their strong bond with Slovenian culture was preserved through memories, stories, music, dance, food, through informal gatherings with Slovenian friends, attending events organized by the Slovenian Canadian Association in Edmonton<sup>69</sup>, exchanging letters with friends and

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<sup>66</sup> From Stanka’s story.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> From the authors notes taken during the conversation with Stanka in Edmonton in January 2008.

<sup>69</sup> In the book about Slovenian Canadian Association Janko and his family are mentioned on the following pages: 27, 77, 187 and 196. See: *Slovensko-kanadsko društvo - Slovenian Canadian Association Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, 1964-2004: štiri-deset let ohranjanja slovenske kulturne dediščine - forty years of preservation of Slovenian culture*, a c. di M. Trebše-Štolfa, Slovensko-kanadsko društvo - Slovenian Canadian Association, Edmonton/Ljubljana 2004.

relatives in Slovenia and occasional visits to their country of origin. It may be due to the absence of Slovenian ethnic shops in Canada or due to the overlapping of her domestic cooking with Italian cuisine, but it seems important to note that Stanka continues to buy groceries predominantly in Italian shops. She masters in making *polenta*, *jota*, *mineštra* (*minestrone*), *njoki* (*gnocchi*), *paštašuta* (pasta sciutta), which are typical dishes for the border Friuli, Triestine and Soča regions. Also her new official name, Stella, that replaced her Slavic name Stanislava, might have been chosen in the light of her childhood, spent in Italy; the name is of Latin or Italian origin, but at the same time it fits well in the Anglophone environment. In her choice of her new name I recognize another consequence of intensive cultural encounters in the region of her origin, determined by the historical development, which influenced mutable cultural affiliation. These encounters left traces also in the architecture, dialects, cuisine and folklore, indicating how in the border areas various cultural spheres of influence overlap and how national macro-cultures encompass smaller local cultures. It was reported that the population in Venezia Giulia had a strong local identity, whose national aspects were often negotiated<sup>70</sup>.

If we put ourselves in Stanka's shoes, it is logical that she first had escaped to Italy. It was not only physically the easiest way, but the most mindful solution in a cultural and symbolic sense. She knew the Italian language and was familiar with the basic cultural features of the country, having grown up in Italy and completed the first grades of Italian elementary school by 1943, while since 1947 her family has owned land across the state border. As well, the fact that her elder sister Olga married a Friulian man and moved over to Friuli, considerably shaped Stanka's planning strategies. Researching an individual perspective through narrative or life story importantly influences the researcher's point of view. From Stanka's narration it is evident, that the reasons to escape her place of birth were not much political and not even entirely economic. Moreover, she emphasized a restrictive family atmosphere that opposed her new vision about the future, as to what to do and how to work, how to live, and where to travel. All her wishes seemingly started to burst out when she met Janko, fell in love with him and started to think about their common future. In the life course perspective the institution of marriage is considered as one of the crucial turning points in life, which enables transition from the original familial circle to another, which influences residential trajectories and often coincides with migration<sup>71</sup>. Due to exceptional circumstances Stanka and Janko had to adapt their plans to rather unusual patterns and only got married in Canada. However, they acted as a couple already when they were only thinking about emigrating. Shortly put, if we want to upgrade predominant political or economic labels of illegal migrations, we need to take into account one of the crucial concepts in the migrations studies – observing emigrants through the prism of their families and acquaintances, especially families with clearly defined family roles in a traditional patriarchal environment –<sup>72</sup>.

In addition, this perspective reveals the need for a different linguistic register. The classification and categorization of a given subject is understood differently in different

<sup>70</sup> P. Ballinger, *Opting for Identity*, cit., p. 120; R. Pupo, A. Panjek, *Oltre l'Italia e l'Europa*, cit., p. 352. A. Urbancic, Anne, *Crossed Identities: Italo-Slovenes and the Friulians*, in *An Italian Region in Canada: The Case of Friuli-Venezia Giulia*, a c. di Konrad Eisenbichler, Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Toronto 1998, pp. 19-33.

<sup>71</sup> C. H. Mulder, M. Wagner, *Migration and Marriage in Life course: a Method for Studying Synchronized Events*, in «*European Journal of Population*», n. 9, 1993, p. 56.

<sup>72</sup> M. Boyd, *Family and Personal Networks in International Migration*, pp. 638-670; D. Hoerder, *Segmented Macrosystem*, cit., pp. 78-81.

times and places. The mixed use of various bureaucratic, legal and academic jargons and ordinary language may result in inconsistencies. As Peter Li<sup>73</sup> points out, each of these perspectives brings about a different context in determining who is a migrant and what is expected of him/her. The used typologies differed over time in order to suit the actual political trends. From the perspective of the Yugoslav authorities, Stanka was at first classified as an illegal political emigrant, while from a present-day perspective she is seen more as an economic emigrant. Italian and IRO officials perceived her as a (Yugo) Slav refugee, while in Canadian immigration statistics she was put down as an alien immigrant and considered a worker. She told me that sometimes people in Canada called her a DP<sup>74</sup>, while villagers and friends in Slovenia often referred to her as a Canadian or also an American. Stanka has never thought of herself as fitting any of these descriptions. The problematic nature of single-layered categorization similarly reveals itself in respect to her reasons for emigrating, where, as is can be discerned from her narrative, political reasons are interwoven with economic, social and purely personal ones. Stanka left her home country when her reasons for emigration reached a critical point and when a suitable moment for escape presented itself.

The analysis on the personal level reveals the complexity, intertwinement and contradictions inherent in all social processes. Such a perspective emphasizes the inadequacy of using absolute definitions or established monochrome syntagmas (such as political refugee, economic emigrant or illegal migrant in our case), despite the fact that personal motives and personal accounts usually serve as the basis for the administrative categorization of the migrants<sup>75</sup>. Legal experts who were in the late 1940s engaged in establishing international agencies responsible for the acute post-war refugee issue (such as IRO, ILO, OEEC<sup>76</sup> and others) were only coming to realize that it is theoretically plausible, but practically impossible to draw a clear distinction between «refugees» and «migrants»<sup>77</sup>. Every political system contains «both a political and an economic doctrine; political reasons for flight might very well be given in an economic form, thus making a political objector look like an ordinary migrant»<sup>78</sup>. Also the element of persecution, which used to be essential in recognizing someone's refugee status, was met with certain degree of relativity in practice<sup>79</sup>. All the aforementioned terms should therefore be carefully taken into account as descriptive, simplified concepts or ones that serve only as analytical tools, otherwise the potential for interpretation of the studied matter is considerably weakened.

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<sup>73</sup> Peter Li is one of the leading researchers of Canadian immigration policies, strong in his descriptive and analytical argumentation. One of his chapters is devoted to the social constructions of the term immigrant, its ambiguity and bureaucratic, folk, scientific, analytical use of the term. P. Li, *Destination Canada, Immigration Debates and Issues*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, p. 39; Similarly about the vagueness of labelling the migrants: A. Thompson, *Moving Stories*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>74</sup> An acronym for «displaced person», in Anglophone environment often used as an insult for socially and economically undesirable refugees.

<sup>75</sup> J. Vernant, *The Refugee in the Post-War World*, cit., pp. 4-9; P. Ballinger, *Opting for reality*, cit., pp. 115-140.

<sup>76</sup> Crucial post-war international institutions for solving the refugee question, induced by WWII: International Refugee Organization, International Labour Organization, Organization for European Economic Cooperation.

<sup>77</sup> It must be pointed out that in the first post-war years the categorization of group migrants was slightly different than today. Refugees were first defined in 1951 by the UN Refugee convention in Geneva, migration studies were not developed suitably. Refugees were considered to be driven from homes for political reasons mainly whereas those, who were leaving homes mostly due to economic conditions at home or economic attractions abroad, were named migrants. Compare: J. Vernant, *The Refugee in the Post-War World*, cit.; J. G. Stoessinger, *The refugee and the World Community*, cit.

<sup>78</sup> J. G. Stoessinger, *The refugee and the World Community*, cit., p. 86.

<sup>79</sup> J. Vernant, *The Refugee in the Post-War World*, cit., p. 7-8; P. Ballinger, *Opting for reality*, cit., pp. 115-140.

If the researcher does not concede to what is «normal» or «average», the research subject – instead of being depersonalized – comes to life. Stanka's life-story reveals the intertwinement of various reasons *for* and *against*, which she constantly weighed as she was making her decisions. The individual perspective recognizes her as a migrating person, who within the limits of her possibilities plans and makes decisions. Thus she is set free from «migration waves» and «currents» that would drown out her distinctiveness. In this way, the elements of great importance to understand and explain the various aspects of migration processes, which often remain overlooked in other methodologies, are highlighted. Here I would emphasize the individual's desires and passions, ways of understanding, ambitions, values, fears, insecurities and coincidences. Simultaneously these aspects also suggest that in order to comprehend the often intermingled series of motives, causes and effects of the factors pertaining to migrations, one must delve into areas where historians should venture more frequently: into the field of individual as well as collective psychology and mindsets. In connection to this, I would like to accentuate the importance of considering the objects' personal networks as possibilities for help and information, including disinformation and wilful obstruction, stemming from these. The individual is always embedded in the world within which one acts, and the individual's decisions must be understood as consciously or unconsciously conditioned by one's environment, also by given values, norms and social expectations.