

ITALY FROM BELOW AND FROM THE OUTSIDE-IN:
AN ISTRIAN LIFE STORY ACROSS THE ITALO-YUGOSLAV
BORDER*Bjørn THOMASSEN*

The American University of Rome, Department of International Relations,
IT-00153 Rome, Via Pietro Roselli 4
e-mail: bjorn_thomassen@yahoo.co.uk

ABSTRACT

This article offers perspectives on Italy in the post-war period as seen from its border to Yugoslavia, and as seen from the life experience of an 'ordinary woman' and her family from Istria. These perspectives will be reconstructed by telling the life story of one Italian-Istrian exile who left Yugoslavia for Italy after the Second World War and later settled down in Trieste, taking part of the larger population movement across the Italo-Yugoslav border known as the Exodus (L'esodo). Following an anthropological approach to history and memory, the narrative will serve to enter a discussion of contested identity in this particular border region, including the rivalling interpretations of World War II events. This will provide an alternative perspective on popular memory construction and identity formation in post-war Italy, and will, finally, point to ongoing reconfigurations of 'Italy' understood as an imagined community.

Key words: Istrian Exiles, World War II Memory, Life Story, National Identity

*L'ITALIA DAL BASSO E DA FUORI: UNA STORIA DI VITA
ISTRIANA ATTRAVERSO IL CONFINE ITALO-JUGOSLAVO*

SINTESI

L'articolo offre delle rappresentazioni dell'Italia del dopoguerra, viste dal suo confine con la Jugoslavia e attraverso un'esperienza di vita di una "donna comune" e della sua famiglia, originari dell'Istria. Questi ritratti vengono ricostruiti attraverso la narrazione della storia di vita di un'esule italo-istriana, la quale – espatriando dalla Jugoslavia in Italia dopo la fine della seconda guerra mondiale e stabilendosi successivamente a Trieste – ha fatto parte del grande movimento di persone che hanno attraversato il confine italo-jugoslavo, conosciuto con il termine "L'esodo". Seguendo un

approccio antropologico nei riguardi della storia e della memoria, la narrativa servirà ad aprire una discussione sull'identità contestata in questa particolare area di confine, comprese le contrastanti interpretazioni degli eventi della seconda guerra mondiale. Fornirà in questo modo un punto di vista alternativo sulla costruzione della memoria popolare e sulla formazione dell'identità nell'Italia del dopoguerra, rilevando infine le attuali riconfigurazioni dell'Italia intesa come una comunità immaginata.

Parole chiave: esuli istriani, memoria della seconda guerra mondiale, storia di vita, identità nazionale

A life story across the border: the title of this article suggests a linking of a certain *method* or telling *technique* with a specific *topic* or a certain *place*. It is not about theory. Minimally it means only this: the telling of a life story based on somebody's life experience marked by the existence and crossing of a political border. The life of somebody born in a border area, or more simply, the narrative of a border dweller: nothing more and nothing less than that. In fact I shall initially not go much beyond this minimalist understanding of the title. Based upon data gathered during fieldwork in Trieste in 1999–2000, I will simply tell the story of an Istrian woman and her family who chose to leave Istria as it had become Yugoslav after the Second World War and moved to Italy.

The family forms part of the larger group of people who left Istria, Fiume/Rijeka, and Dalmatia from 1945 to 1956, in the aftermath of the Second World War and after the end of the border dispute between Italy and Yugoslavia in 1954. The number of these persons is estimated to be from 200,000 to 380,000 individuals, all according to one's sources. In Italy their existence has scarcely been noticed, and the very 'loss of Istria' to Yugoslavia has until recently been nothing but a minor political issue outside the Istrian's own organizations – a somewhat peculiar omission in light of the important symbolic and rhetorical role normally occupied by border regions within nationalisms. Nor has much been written about this group of people and their 'identity' (with the notable exceptions of Ballinger, 1998; Nemeč, 1998) possibly because it has never managed to find a place within the established discourses of 'minority groups' within nation-states. Istrians who came to Italy are simply Italian, in contrast to the more examined Slovene minority in Italy (see for example Parovel, 1985) or the Italian minority in Slovenia and Croatia (see for example Bergnach, Radin, 1994).

In the Julian Region both World Wars resulted in shifts in physical borders and massive population movements. Building onto historically rooted cultural symbolisms dating back into the 19th century, the 1918 state border between Italy and Yugoslavia was semantically constructed as a cultural divide between 'Latins' and 'Slavs', which turned into conflicting *national* divides with Italian and Slovene/Yugoslav nationalisms confronting each other at the border. On to these deeply

embedded meanings another layer of political and cultural symbolism was added by the Cold War, creating a semantic space dividing the Democratic West from the Communist East. From 1945 the border between Italy and Yugoslavia came to signal all these things in a multiple layering of meanings of an already over-determined national divide. After World War II, Trieste and the Julian Region remained contested by both Italy and Yugoslavia, meeting at the newly established Iron Curtain that had Trieste as its southernmost point and as a disputed locus of the rising Cold War conflict. Inhabitants of Istria have had the Cold War political-ideological, cultural, and territorial dichotomies close to their lives. With the Iron Curtain cutting across the Julian landscape, a series of negative cultural and political stereotypes developed over and across the Italo-Yugoslav border, creating 'Italo-fascists' and 'Slav-Communists' as hateful enemy categories and mutually exclusive political-national groups, duplicated in the local environments on both sides of the border.

Much has been written about this territorial-political conflict from the perspective of international relations and Cold War politics (see for example De Castro, 1954), but there is little literature dealing with the way in which ordinary people reacted to this tense environment, carving out a role and an identity for themselves. The Visintin family, whose story I shall recount in some detail, had their founding life experiences within this territorial, politico-cultural reality. The way in which they have dealt with these realities is one that on both sides of the Italian-Yugoslav border became known (and often dismissed) as 'Italian nationalist'. It is irrelevant whether one sympathizes or not with such a perspective. The fact that many self-identified Italians who left Istria developed strong national identities is something for us to understand and analyse.

However, my aim is not to take apart or otherwise 'explain' the narrative. I do want to argue, instead, that this narrative contains a certain pattern in which Italy the 'nation' is just one 'item' that finds its place in a meaningful narrative that ties the person her larger surroundings. Therefore it bespeaks the implosion of nationalism in Istria and the Julian Region, as it bespeaks Italian national identity as it developed in the post-war period. I want to suggest that while the Istrian exile experience is indeed a singular story, it is also a highly revealing perspective, not only on this peculiar border region, but also on 'Italy' understood as a morally imagined community. It is a perspective on Italy 'from below', and it is a perspective on Italy 'from the outside-in', from Italy's absolute geographical periphery, the border to Yugoslavia (now Slovenia/Croatia), and yet it raises a series of central issues.

It goes without saying that the story I will tell cannot be taken as representative of the whole Istrian area. Even if we delimit the debate to people who were part of the Exodus, the perspective represented here is only one out of many. I should also underline that my aim in telling the story is not historiographic, in the sense that I do not wish to use oral information to establish the 'truth' about what happened in Istria during and after the Second World War. I will allow myself to consider the life-story

in its own right: as a way of creating meaningful identity in the present. I would therefore invite the reader to clean the screen and simply listen to the story.

Daniela Visintin from Montona¹

*"We chose Italy. But Italy did not want us" – Daniela Visintin, as we talk about being an Istrian exile in Italy.*²

Daniela Visintin is an *esule*,³ an exile. She left Istria, she says, because she wanted to remain Italian. She opted for Italy to retain her Italian citizenship and arrived legally in Italy with refugee status. She became a refugee in her own country, Italy.

Daniela Visintin is from Montona, Istria, Italy. I met her in her apartment in Trieste where she lives with her mother, Bianca Visintin, who was born in Montona, then Austria, in 1908. I was introduced to Daniela and Bianca by the daughter of Daniela's sister (Bianca's granddaughter), whom I had met via my participation in the youth section of the 'Unione degli Istriani', one of the Istrian exile organizations in Trieste. I went to visit the family since I was interested in speaking with Istrians who had personal memories of the inter-war period and possibly also of the period prior to World War I when Istria belonged to Austria, as has Bianca Visintin. While Bianca's memory would vary according to the occasion, Daniela, who was born in 1932, not only had a good memory: she had been actively collecting books and newspaper articles about Istria, about its culture, and about the political struggle between Italy and Yugoslavia as it arose during and after the Second World War. Daniela had also been active in the Montonese 'family' ('La Famiglia Montonesa')⁴ and involved in writing and publishing their journal '4 ciacole soto la llosa',⁵ of which she had all the editions

¹ By request of the informant, name has been changed.

² The quotes used throughout the text stem from field notes obtained through informal conversation during fieldwork in Trieste, June 1998– November 1999. Conversations took place in Daniela's Visintin's apartment in Trieste.

³ 'Esule' was the legal category given to the people who had opted for Italy after the Second World War. It soon also became the cultural category used to define all the Italians who had left/escaped Yugoslavia. Legally speaking, however, only people who had 'opted' for Italian citizenship were recognised as exiles (*esuli*). To receive this status one needed to apply for the option in Yugoslavia during one of the periods agreed upon in bilateral agreements between Italy and Yugoslavia. This included a proving one's Italianness, which was not always an easy thing (even families were sometimes split as some were recognised as 'Italian', others not – some 30.000 persons are said to have had their option refused). Once in Italy, the optants (*optanti*) also needed a UN approval of the documents provided in Yugoslavia, which for technical reasons also proved troublesome in some cases. If the documents were not in order, there was often no practical way of having them remade. Therefore, less than 200.000 Istrians were officially classified as *esuli*, while a much higher number of people are likely to have left Istria behind.

⁴ The Istrian 'families' are hometown organizations representing the dispersed people of the Istrian towns left behind after 1945.

⁵ Which would be "4 chiacchiere sotto la Loggia" ["4 chats under the *loggia*"] in standard Italian. The

from 1957 until today. After our first conversation, Daniela invited me to come back and have a look at the books and journals she had collected, and so I did. In fact I would soon start to visit Daniela and Bianca on a weekly basis. During my visits I would consult the books Daniela had prepared for me and continue talking with both of them about Istria and their life experiences, so heavily marked by the abandonment of their house in Montona.

Remembering Montona

On our second meeting Daniela had prepared two photo albums for us to look at. The first photo showed Montona on the 4th of November in 1918, the day it became Italian. Bianca, sitting next to us, burst out:

"I remember that day as if it was yesterday! Italy! Just the name of it, "Italy"! Oh, yes, that was a celebration. All of the town was waiting at the train station for the bersaglieri [the Italian soldiers] to show up, and once they came into sight, hanging out of the train windows, everybody waved the Italian flag."

From where had you got the Italian flag, I asked?

"We had always had an Italian flag at home, but it had remained hidden for so long. We had been preparing it the night before, all of us together, and now we could take it out into the open... 'Italia!', just the sound of it...everybody was happy, it was something we felt inside, it is difficult to explain, you should have been there..."

Bianca stops for she has started to cry, so Daniela takes over:

Do you see, this was something everybody wanted. In Montona we were all Italians.

This was an indirect answer to some of the questions I had posed during our first meeting. I had asked about the relationship between 'Italians' and 'Slavs' before and after 1945, and about the extent to which people of their town, according to them, identified with Italy. So from the first day I started to 'travel' with Daniela and Bianca to their hometown Montona. Those travels happened with the help of photos, personal stories and our joint imagination. Their memories were often painful and bitter, and the limits of transgression were always subtle since my questions would enter into open wounds. Bianca so often would stop my questions by saying:

"Of all the gifts God has given me, I thank him especially for one: the ability to forget...maybe not forget completely, you can never forget, but at the same time you have to forget, to go on, and stop thinking about what has happened...for when I think about what we have experienced, then I almost cannot believe it...it is like a film passing before your eyes."

expression was used by the Montonese as they gathered under their Venetian *loggia* in the evenings to 'chat'. The dialects among the Italian-speaking parts of the Istrian population have been heavily influenced by Venetian. Linguists sometimes use the term 'istro-veneto'.

At the same time they both enjoyed telling me about their lives, and perhaps especially to a curious foreigner. 94-year-old Bianca never quite understood where I was from and why I was interested in their lives, and why it had anything to do with my university studies. Nobody in Italy had ever shown any interest in Istria, and now a young foreigner began to know about precise episodes, persons, and places of her home town. Daniela said,

"Nobody here in Italy has ever really understood who we are and what has happened to us...so it is a bit strange that you come from Denmark and ask these questions. You know all these things that nobody here in Italy has ever wanted to even hear about. Our stories were always boycotted."

This was an experience shared by most exiles I talked to: they felt a need to tell their personal stories which had had so little audience outside their own narrow Istrian circles. They saw their conversations with me as a possibility to make their unspoken (or rather, unregistered) story reach out to a larger audience. As we became good friends, Daniela took upon herself the task of providing me with written material, and to put me into contact with other Istrians willing to share their experiences with me. My interest in their past would, of course, influence our relationship since I was entering their personal memories. To enter a memory is to see it and therefore also to live through it. Normally I would try just to understand the memories important to them and simply encourage them to keep on talking about whatever they found worthwhile remembering. I would also use my visits to go through the written material Daniela had prepared for me, and then discuss it with Daniela to have her perspective on it. At some point I also started to introduce other versions of the past that somehow conflicted with theirs, curious to know their response. I say this to underline the way in which we influence and are influenced by our research subjects. This is not a 'pollution' of data, but the condition of its existence, for without this mutual influencing there is not much for us to get hold of.

In the first photo album Daniela showed me, there was a succession of different images from Montona prior to 1945: everyday life, the church, the square where people collected for festivities, their house, their fields. Daniela had collected these photos after leaving Montona and had provided most of the photos with excerpts of text praising the nature of Istria and the virtues of the Italian nation, quoting for example Dante or Gabriele d'Annunzio. These quotes were similar if not identical to the ones I would later find in their homestead journal. Then we opened the second photo album. The first photo was from the 'Piazza dell'Unità' in Trieste, 1954, on the day that Trieste returned to Italy, after two years of German rule (1943–1945), 42 days of Yugoslav rule (May–June 1945), and almost 10 years of Allied rule (1945–1954). The photo struck me as similar to the photo from 1918: the arrival of the Italian soldiers, a crowd gathered on the central square, and people waving the Italian flag as a part of the festivities. Both Daniela and Bianca were present that day, waving their

Italian flag. For Bianca it was the second time she had welcomed Italian troops as liberators. Daniela remembers,

"We were happy because Trieste had been saved. At the same time we were sad, thinking about Istria...It had all been lost, I think everybody had realized by then...but at the least Trieste was saved."

Daniela's life story

Daniela was born in Montona⁶ in 1932. Her father worked as a ticket collector on the local bus line, and was often away during weekends. Bianca worked in the restaurant belonging to her family-in-law, just below Montona at the entrance of the town. Daniela grew up in that house, with the restaurant on the ground floor, and their private space on the first floor, together with her younger sister, her parents and her grandmother. As a part of the restaurant, the family had a state licence to sell tobacco and salt. When she was 10-years-old she went to Trieste in order to enter high school, while still spending weekends and summer periods at home in Montona. She was therefore in Montona the day Italy capitulated on the 8th of September, 1943.

"People came to our restaurant, they were happy...it was strange, everything. I went up to my room, and knelt down in front of the Madonna, asking God to protect us. [...] Two days later Tito's troops arrived. Until then we had not felt the war in Montona...indirectly of course, yes. Sons of our town had been sent to the front etc. My cousin had died in battle. But in Montona itself it was from 1943 that the war started."

Daniela tells me how the Partisans took over power in Montona, and how she and her family feared them. She also tells how they burned the archives of the *comune*. The arrival of the German troops some weeks later (October 1943) she remembers as a semi-salvation, although everybody feared the Germans as well. The position of the Visintin's house meant that they were sometimes literally caught in the crossfire between Germans and Partisans, and their lives were in danger on more than one occasion. The Germans would come and eat in their restaurant, and so would the Partisans. There were shooting episodes right outside their door, and one night their house was hit by German bombs directed at Partisan positions just behind the house. The Partisans would come from the backdoor and demand food and tobacco, while the Germans would enter through the front door. As much of the Istrian population, the Visintin family was caught in the crossfire between two fighting forces, and both seemed foreign to them. As they see it today, the Germans were the better of two evils. Still, Bianca once saved a Partisan from being caught by the Germans, by hiding him away in their back garden.

⁶ Montona is a picturesque old fortified town in the Venetian style, built on a hilltop in inland Istria. It lies now in Croatia (*Motovun* is its official Croat name), close to the Slovenian border. There are only a few Italian families left.

As the Partisans withdrew at the German invasion, a local defence was set up in Montona, consisting of a group of younger Italians who then collaborated with the Germans against the Titoist Partisans. Daniela talks about these young men as *i nostri*, 'our lads'. For Daniela the real trouble began as the war ended in 1945 and the new preliminary borders were erected between Italy and Yugoslavia and therefore between Trieste and Montona. As the war ended in Italy and the Germans withdrew, Istria was once again occupied by Titoist troops. To Daniela, the events from September 1943 repeated themselves. Daniela remembers that she and her family were hoping for the Western Allies to arrive, "as had happened in Trieste". They sat around the radio and waited for the news that would decide the fate of Istria. They witnessed new arrests, executions, heard again about the *foibe*,⁷ and generally perceived the Partisan rule as a total taking-over of power that made them feel like strangers in their own town. "We were afraid, day and night...fear, we lived in fear", Bianca says.

While in Trieste, Daniela would participate in many of the public political demonstrations against what she still sees as the Slavic occupation of Istria. On one of her return trips to Montona she had her identity card confiscated by the new Titoist local authorities, who thereby made it near impossible for Daniela to cross the border. The border therefore also stopped her studies before they had ever really started, and she never took them up again. Daniela remembers how strange the border between Trieste and Istria seemed to her. Trieste had always represented the economic and political capital to the Istrians, at the least where she came from. To see Istria divided from Trieste, and thereby from the rest of Italy, was something of a shock. For her, going from Montona to Trieste had been like going from her village to the nearby city. It was her way to high school and it had never implied crossing any border. She had never even been to Pola (Pula) or Fiume (Rijeka), or other of the other bigger Istrian cities towards the south. Whenever there was something to be done, Trieste was the reference point.

The 'esodo' and the return to the nation that no longer was

Immediately after the Paris Peace Treaty in 1947, the Visintin family opted for Italy, and in 1948 they left Montona as so-called optants. The option was a choice made possible to those who wished to retain their Italian citizenship, but who, in that case, were forced to leave what had by then become Yugoslav jurisdiction.⁸ Daniela

⁷ The *foibe* are the karstic pits where Tito's Partisans killed an unknown number of soldiers and civilians in the period between 1943 and 1945. What exactly happened at the *foibe* is one of the hotly contested issues and political-historiographical debates of the region, still today.

⁸ The Paris Peace Treaty, signed the 10/2 1947, defines both Italy's new borders and the rules and rights concerning '*Nazionalità - Diritti civili e politici*' for the Italian citizens outside those new borders. Section 2, article 19.1 states that: "I cittadini italiani che, al 10 giugno 1940, erano domiciliati in territorio ceduto dall'Italia ad un altro stato per effetto del presente Trattato, ed i loro figli nati dopo quella data diverranno [...] cittadini godenti di pieni diritti civili e politici dello stato al quale il territo-

and Bianca both say that this was not even a choice which was discussed in her family. If Montona was no longer Italian, leaving Istria was something like an automatism. Why that, I asked during one of our conversations?

"You have to understand that everybody left Montona. None of the Italians stayed. Yes, maybe two or three persons, that is all. First of all you could no longer speak Italian. Going to church was also considered something like a crime. The people who decided were not even from Istria. They were Slavs from somewhere else. Not even the local Slavs understood their language! In our restaurant we were forced to write the menu in Croat. Who knew Croat? None of us. We told them that they had to write it for us. Even the local Slavs then had to ask us in Italian what was on the menu! But first of all there was the fear. People had been sent away, people had been killed. Everybody was afraid, no one could feel safe. We were afraid for my father, although he had not even been to war. People were arrested during the night. All of this was happening even if the war was over. All Italians were treated as criminals. They even arrested one woman who was in her late 80s, and made her sleep for two nights in the prison, accused of what? Nobody even told her! Those who had defended Montona from the Partisans and who did not manage to escape to Italy were killed. One of them was killed in the public square in front of the church. We all knew him, he was loved by everyone. Nobody wanted to live under these conditions. We kept on hoping for Istria to remain Italian, but we soon understood that not even our own Government would do anything to help us. As we understood that Istria had fallen to Yugoslavia and that in order to remain Italian you had to leave, we did not hesitate a second. We asked for the option. We chose Italy."

The Visintin family left Montona on a carriage. Bianca starts to cry again as she visualises the episode:

"I still remember that day, my God. My husband, when he gave the key of our house to this person whom I did not know, one of them, I do not know...when he gave the key while we were sitting on the carriage with a bit of our furniture. One thing is to leave a place...but your house! Your house is your house, it is like a part of you. Our dog was looking at us, as if he did not know whether to come with us or not, and then, in the last second, as we started to move, he jumped up to us. Not even he wanted to remain with the Slavs! The thing is that everybody left, sooner or later everybody left. And this is what I say: it is better to leave...the way things were...it was impossible to stay, the Slavs did everything to make us go. No, at a certain point it is better to leave, if you want to live with any respect for yourself."

Once in Italy the family settled down in a smaller town of Emilia where two distant relatives lived. Daniela lived five years in Emiglia without much contact with the local population. Her sister was (like many other exiles still of school age) sent away

rio viene ceduto [...]. Essi perderanno la loro cittadinanza italiana al momento in cui diventeranno cittadini dello Stato subentrante". In other words, Italian citizenship equalled exodus.

to a school in Tuscany, where she lived and studied with other Italian children of the same age. Daniela had no such experience of being inserted in a new context in Italy. That goes some way to explaining why Daniela remained much more attached to Istria than her sister. Bianca Visintin, Daniela's mother, eventually got a job at the local police station cleaning, washing, cooking and doing a bit of everything. Daniela's father, never found a job again, so times were not easy. Integrating in Italy turned out to be a somewhat traumatic experience for the Visintin family. As Istrian *esuli* they had the right to reopen in Italy the kind of commercial activities they had exercised while still living in Istria. So they asked for a licence to open a tobacco sales, but never obtained the permission from the local authorities. This was yet another signal to Daniela and her parents that they were not really wanted in Italy:

"They said that there was already one tobacco shop in the town...but this was just an excuse. The fact is that nobody wanted us [...]

And this is what hurts the most: that our people (i nostri) did not want to help us...that they [the Yugoslavs] did not want to – that is normal, you can even understand that, but that our people refused us...It is as if your parents refuse to help you, do you understand what that means?"

Daniela and her family felt betrayed, not only by the 'slavs' but by Italy, by their own kin. This is her personal drama, reflecting that of many Istrians in Italy. The nation for which her family had sacrificed everything did not want them any longer. Bianca says:

"We should never have gone to Emilia. When we arrived they called us 'todeschi' ['Germans']...!!! They had no idea who we were, and it was impossible to explain. I smiled and said nothing in all that period, otherwise they would have never let me work, but inside of me... inside of me..."

and Daniela continues:

"It was so strange: we had left in order to remain Italians. Then we arrive in Italy, our madre-patria, and nobody really understands who we are. For example I remember a ceremony for the 4th of November [national commemoration celebrating Italy's victory in World War I], it must have been in 1949 or 1950. We went to the central square in order to celebrate. It was an important day for us, and we wanted to celebrate it with our soldiers and with our countrymen. Besides the military representatives we were the only ones there, me and my parents! Even the soldiers there who performed the ritual looked at us with some surprise: what were we doing there? It was almost comic, but I remember it made me feel so much out of place. For us, those soldiers who had died in the First World War had died for us too. The people of the town passed by, not even knowing what was being celebrated! Then, after the ceremony, because my mother worked for the Carabinieri, we were invited for lunch there with the police and some of the military personnel. I remember it so clearly, for it was the first time that I sang our national anthem...not the first time in that sense of course,

I had sung it on many occasions, and so had my mother. But it was the first time we sang it in Italy after the exodus. We stood up as we began to sing, as we had always done, and that was a moment of embarrassment for us all, for those in uniform were not standing up, and now even they looked strangely at us. In order to prevent the embarrassment, also they stood and together we finished the anthem. Afterwards we had to explain to them how important that song was to us: it was exactly in order to be able to sing that song that we had left our homes, that we had left our land! That song, and that day: for us it was a commemoration of the Italians who had died for us, who had finally given Istria to Italy, who had wanted to protect us! Maybe some of them understood, I do not know. But here in Italy nobody even stands as they sing their national anthem, and most people do not even know it. The Communists have destroyed even that, they have turned it into something sinful to love your nation."

In 1953, after much hardship, the Visintin family left Emilia and established themselves in Trieste, where they opened a small shop selling sweets. Daniela later got a part-time job as a secretary at one of the Istrian organizations established to receive the refugees arriving from Istria, and later she started to work part time for the *Lega Nazionale*, a pro-Italian cultural organization. The *Lega Nazionale* would soon also come to provide Bianca and Daniela with their most important social contacts. Most of Daniela's and Bianca's travels in Italy were made as trips organized by the *Lega Nazionale*. Back in Trieste, Daniela was less than 40 kilometres from her hometown, but she and her family has never gone there to visit. Not that they forgot about Montona, quite the contrary. In the mid 1950s Daniela was one of the exiles from Montona who established the Montona homestead organization (the 'Montonese family'), and was active also in the writing of their monthly journal. They would actively participate in the 'family gatherings', thus reconstructing some of their home environment in the Trieste setting. Daniela's father had died just after their arrival to Trieste. Bianca and Daniela have lived together ever since in their small apartment in Trieste. They now live from the pensions they receive, and Daniela's main occupation is to take care of her mother. On their walls hang paintings and pictures of Montona. On one of the photos from the album I notice that on the same wall the Italian flag once hung as well, just above a painting of Montona, and right in front of the table where I would sit and study and where we would have our weekly conversations.

Istrian perspectives on Italy

The dramatic yet apparently innocent story of Daniela Visintin and her family contains a series of perspectives relevant to a broader understanding of the post-1945 Italian exiles in Italy, a fairly unwritten chapter in the history of modern Italy. Indirectly these perspectives also invite for a 'bordered' reflection of post-war Italy as such. Let me in the following discussion expand on just two themes emerging from

the narrative. One is the implicit clash with more 'official' and/or more politically legitimate histories of Italy (and its borders) in the post-war period. As became obvious throughout the account, Daniela tells her story *against* what she regards treason by the Italian state and by the international community, and she also tells it *against* the Resistance movement (and therefore against the Italian Left). This clash between 'legitimate histories' and silenced or politically illegitimate stories (as is Daniela's) is related to another theme, namely a strong and vital sense of Italian national identity that Daniela feels has been suppressed and misrecognised both by the broader environment on the Italian side of the border and by 'official Italy'.

Conflicting stories

The narrative of the Exodus offered by Daniela, and indeed by most Istrian exiles and their official organisations, tells a story of Slavic and communist persecution of largely innocent Italians whose only crime was to identify themselves as Italians with a natural desire to live within the Italian state. This version has been, and still is, challenged from a variety of perspectives. Obviously, the official Yugoslav history of the *esodo* differed dramatically from the accounts offered by the exiles themselves. The official Yugoslav treatment of the question developed prior to 1954, and was instrumental in defending Yugoslavia's policies in front of the international audience, especially since the territorial question of Trieste and parts of Istria (the so-called Zones A and B) was yet to be resolved. The exiles' accusations of having been politically *and* nationally persecuted had to be refused categorically since it undermined Titoist Yugoslavia's claims to have realised a socialist society based on ethnic brotherhood, just as it undermined the Yugoslav peace negotiators attempt to stress the democratic character of the Yugoslav People's Republic. To cut a long story short, the official Yugoslav version of the Istrian exodus instead built on accusations against 'Italy', against the Big Powers, against 'fascism' and against 'capitalism': people had left Istria and Yugoslavia because of propaganda against the socialist system, launched by Italy and other 'capitalist states' in their larger fight against Socialism (see Kardelj, 1953). This version obviously labelled the exiles individually as having given in to the evil forces of world-Capitalism, as traitors of the Yugoslav People: 'counter-revolutionaries', as internal enemies of Yugoslavia were stigmatised (and sometimes with fatal consequences). This version of the events became tied to a popular and still widespread account: that those who left Istria were mostly 'Italian fascists on the run', having 'deserved' their destiny as refugees. Importantly, such rival and incommensurable interpretations of the exodus did not stay on the Yugoslav side of the border: once in Italy, the Istrian exiles were often stamped as 'fascist': they themselves were to blame for their sufferings.

Silenced histories: forgetting Istria

"Although the peace treaty was a saddening experience for the Italians they accepted it with relatively little bitterness", says a historian of modern Italy (Whisemann, 1971, 14), reflecting a generally accepted viewpoint standing in stark contrast to the real and strong bitterness felt by Italian Istrians like the Visintin family, who, after the peace treaty in 1947 and the opening of the first option period in 1948, abandoned their homes and left Istria. One other source of exile discontent has been this larger official diplomatic and historiographical treatment of the 'Trieste question' as having been 'successfully' solved in 1954. While much of the exile anger is easily localised with Tito's Yugoslavia and his Communist 'lies' of a Socialist paradise (remarkably well-received in the West, in their eyes), the exile anger against this rhetoric of a 'successful border settlement' was from the beginning directed against the 'system' as such, i.e. against the Big Powers, and against the Italian state itself.

As well analysed by Ballinger (1999), the very labelling of the 'Trieste crisis' by which the territorial dispute between Italy and Yugoslavia became internationally known, tended to gloss over the fact that a much larger territory (including Istria) was in dispute. The American and English efforts to obtain a peaceful resolution concentrated from the beginning on Trieste, probably due to military-strategic interests of the Western powers. For Yugoslavia and Italy, as well as for the wider European audience, what was symbolically at stake was the fate of Trieste. The focus on Trieste reflected its old nationalist symbolism in both Italy and Yugoslavia that connoted the city as shorthand for Italy's unredeemed lands or as shorthand for the Slovenes fight for freedom and unification. After 1945 Trieste was thus (symbolically) important to the Italian state, while 'Istria' was somewhat more distant and strategically much less relevant. Granted this focus, as Trieste was 'saved for Italy' officially the 'crisis' had come to a close and indeed, it could be claimed, to the satisfaction of Italy.

From 'above' the territorial dispute between Italy and Yugoslavia even became recorded as a showcase for successful international border delineation (see Ballinger, 1999) while in Italy the 'Trieste Crisis' became, by De Gasperi's Christian Democratic administration, depicted as 'resolved' in favour of Italy. Judging from the stories told to me by many Istrian exiles, De Gasperi and his administration was largely successful with this interpretation in front of the Italian public. Daniela and Bianca, remembering when the border treaty was signed and ratified in 1954, told me how Italians would come and congratulate them, since 'now Italy had gotten back all of its national territory'. Daniela recounted an emblematic conversation she had with an Italian family whom she met in a train going to Trieste, just a few weeks after the Rapallo treaty had been signed:

"We were on the same train, and they were nice and friendly, interested in our territories. When I told that I was from Istria, that I was an esule, they congratulated

me, and asked if I was not happy now... I looked at them...and then I tried to explain that Istria was lost...that people had left, that there was no hope left, all that had happened, that we had lost our house... They thought that we had been given everything back! Of course they were not to blame, how could they know. Someone else is to blame."

Who is this 'someone else' in Daniela's view? It is the Italian state and its political establishment. De Gasperi's official reputation in Italy is that of having been a 'great statesman' in the most difficult period of modern Italian history, since he, from an difficult position, managed to have Italy quickly accepted in the exclusive club of reliable Western democracies. In the eyes of the Italian left, De Gasperi has always been seen as an American puppet.⁹ In the eyes of many Istrians I talked to, De Gasperi is rather depicted as a weak statesman, a puppet of anyone who could keep him in power, controlled not only by the Americans but also by the Socialists with whom he governed. Therefore (and because he cared more about 'his' borderlands to the north) he insisted so little on 'saving Istria'; "De Gasperi sold Istria to keep his Tyrol", as almost every Exile would tell me. It is almost an accepted truth among the exiles that it was de Gasperi who failed to enforce a population referendum in Istria, since he feared that this demand would also lead to a population referendum within his own homeland Tyrol, a referendum that Italy could not possibly win (because of a clear majority of Germans). Among the exiles, the bitter saying still flourishes that "De Gasperi sacrificed 350,000 Italians in order to save 200,000 Germans".

It may belong to the anecdotes of diplomatic history, but Alcide de Gasperi had indeed been born an Austrian subject in Trent, and Italians sometimes laughed at him as an 'Austrian'. The fact is that Italy, with its border on the Brenner confirmed, was left with a German-speaking population of well over 200,000 in the Alto Adige, while an even higher number of Italian-speaking subjects were left outside the new 1947 borders. Seen from the established principles of boundary drawing along ethnic lines this was hardly an optimal solution, and it has often been speculated why the Italian delegation managed to keep Alto Adige while not pressing the Big Powers for a population census in Istria (but see De Castro, 1999). As a defeated nation, Austria naturally stood weaker than Yugoslavia in the peace negotiations, but some would

⁹ It is well-known that De Gasperi rearranged Italy's economy like its foreign policy in close collaboration with the Americans (obtaining thereby Marshall Aid, to the protests of the Italian Communists). One other less well-known American 'reward' was a momentary American support during the nine year long allied administration of Zones A and B, that Italy should be given full control of the territory (excluding, however, the larger part of Istria which from 1947 had already fallen to Yugoslavia). Thus the Americans proposed that the disputed territories be given to Italy just one month before the crucial 1948 elections - very likely in order to provide De Gasperi and the Italian Centre with yet another card to be played against the Left and against the Italian Communists, against whom they could pose themselves as 'defenders of the nation'. After the elections (and after Cominform) the Americans withdrew their proposal.

have it that was De Gasperi himself and his peace delegation that had willingly sacrificed Istria in return for Allied goodwill and the Trent region.

If De Gasperi as the prime representative of state, government and 'establishment' thus became an unpopular figure among many Istrian exiles by his very acceptance of the peace treaty that made most of Istria Yugoslav, for the majority of the Italian middle classes he nonetheless came to represent the democratic bulwark against the Communists. This self-representation was accepted nation-wide, but in the Julian Region it involved a conscious displaying of the negative symbolism in the Communists' giving up on Trieste because of their Soviet-Yugoslav sympathies. The Italian Left remained indecisive with respect to Yugoslavia's claims on Trieste and the full Julian Region, and prior to 1948 the Italian Communist Party, the PCI openly supported Yugoslav claims. For the Italians brought up in the lay religion of the *Risorgimento* demand for the redemption of 'Trento and Trieste', the Communist Party's willingness to cede control of this emblem and unifying symbol of Italy's unification and freedom was hard to swallow – and for those Italians living in the border regions it signified the ultimate historical betrayal. The task for De Gasperi was therefore to convince the Italian public that he was the protector of Italian interests, that he had saved as much as possible of Italy's territories, and that he – despite the Italian Communists, and despite the difficult position of Italy in international diplomacy – had managed to 'give back Trieste to Italy and the Italians'. Such was the rhetoric of the first Italian elections of 1948. For the political elections in the Free Territory of Trieste in 1949, the DC represented itself in Trieste with the slogan "For the reconstruction of the Patria...in justice and liberty".

Such was the official rhetoric once again surrounding the events of 1954, when Italian soldiers triumphantly entered the city, 'reuniting Italy'. The Christian Democrats and the state they represented had saved Italy's honour and its moral-cum-territorial integrity. The Julian Region was remote and unimportant to Italy in that moment, and few Italians would have been able to give its precise location. Yet a tremendous amount of Italian families still had fathers or uncles who had died for this 'Trieste' in World War I. On the symbolic level 'Trieste' remained a useful element in the creation of popular consensus and back-up of the new establishment, while overstressing the question of 'Istria and Dalmatia' had come to connote the wrong kind of irredentist language that the Italian establishment was trying to rid itself of. 'Istria' thus proved a thorny issue to the political establishment. Stressing it in front of its own population would only remind the Italians of a defeat related to their shameful fascist past. Pressing strong territorial demands on Istria and Dalmatia in front of the Allied powers would not only complicate the peace negotiations and a future solution to the disputed territories, but also devalue the symbolic capital of international recognition that Italy was trying to build up.

For the same reasons, de Gasperi, as indeed the political leaders who followed

after him, would not be particularly prone to take the skeleton of the Trieste issue out of the closet anymore than necessary. Instead he would try, on the one hand, to accept Italy's modest international role and, on the other, make a virtue out of it. De Gasperi's speech to the peace conference in 1946 can indeed be read as a policy of national non-assertion, aiming to re-establish Italy as an internationally recognised democracy built on anti-fascism and on non-patriotic Universalist values. Once Trieste was guaranteed to Italy, much pomp was made out of it, but then followed silence on Italy's North-Eastern border. And while Trieste, once its symbolic power as a unifying symbol of the Italian nation had been exhausted, fell into oblivion and remoteness, the Istrian and Dalmatian story simply disappeared from official Italian history. Not a word is mentioned of the Istrian-Dalmatian Exodus in any official history text in the Italian school curriculum (for a short review of the treatment of Italy's north-east border in Italian school books, see Sema, 1999).

For many Istrians all of this was (and is) yet additional proof that Italy was 'selling out' its territory and pride – another 'betrayal', in other words. The official treatment also papered over what the exiles still today see as unresolved legal problems, mainly the status of their abandoned properties (*i beni abbandonati*) and their possible return to Istria as Italian citizens. For the exiles, the 'crisis' had not ended in 1954. The silencing of the Istrian question by official Italy would only make the feeling of loss all the deeper and more humiliating. The feeling that 'Italy' too – Italy as a state, Italy as a nation, Italy as a concrete territory and a symbolic space – has boycotted the Istrian exodus is still widespread among the exiles. For what in the eyes of the Italian public was portrayed as a battle won was for most Istrian exiles experienced as their final defeat. Istrian exiles like Daniela Visintin and her mother Bianca would indeed go and welcome the Italian soldiers as they arrived in Trieste in 1954, mindful all the while of all that had been lost – a loss of which the average Italian was not reminded. Daniela went down to 'Piazza dell'Unità', together with her mother and larger crowds of other Istrian exiles and pro-Italian Triestines who welcomed the Italian troops, arriving by boat 'just like in 1918'. So there was flag-waving, military parades, emotional speeches, tears in the eyes, and public kissing of Garibaldian swords once again. Italian nationalism of the old style was dead and buried in Italy by 1954. Elsewhere in Italy no one but the fascists waved the *tricolore* and only a few would remember the national anthem. On the central square of Trieste the *tricolore* was everywhere to be seen, and people sang the national anthem with such force that even those living in Rome must have heard it – and that may very well have been the intention.

Illegitimate histories: the World War II experience revisited

The experience of the Second World War and its *post hoc* interpretation has been a formative experience for the question of personal and collective identity in post-

war Italy, and indeed for the moral-political underpinning of Republican Italy. This is so also for the Visintin family, as it is for the inhabitants of Trieste and the Julian Region, although here the Second World War memories are possibly even more 'divided' than in the rest of Italy. Indeed, in this extreme region of Italy it sometimes seems as if that war ended a couple of weeks ago, so close are the events of the war and the still-explosive rival interpretations of them. The Second World War is an ever-open site to revisit in order to debate, reconstruct, and demonstrate one's identity, and a ritualised stage for the confrontation not only between Left and Right (as in the rest of Italy), but also between the region's different cultural groups, including an equally ritualised confrontation between the Istrian-Italian exiles and the local Slovenes in Italy, both claiming the right to World War II victimhood.

Daniela did not fight the war, of course, but when speaking about the war from 1943 onwards she identifies completely with the 'Repubblicini', the Republicans who (although having sworn loyalty to the Italian King, who from September 1943 became an American ally) chose to defend her town, allied with the Germans, against the Partisan Movement. That is, she identifies the Partisan movement as her prime enemy. The political danger in Daniela's account is that of the Julian Region becoming Yugoslav. Many Nazi-collaborators (including Triestine mayor during the war, Coceani) would later claim that they had simply defended Italy from Communism and Yugoslav expansionism. That is what makes the war experience in the Julian Region a slightly different matter than in the rest of Italy. The kernel of the matter is that for cultural-national reasons (and often more so than for *political* reasons), many self-identified Italians, and many socialists included, would only very hesitantly identify with a Tito-led Resistance movement with a declared territorial aim of a Yugoslav Istria.

Italy was divided into two in the period 1943–45, it says in all history books, with Mussolini's puppet government of Salò in the North and the government of King Victor Emmanuel III backed by the Allies in the South (another puppet, one may argue, but Italians retrospectively came to take it as having expressed more truly the 'Italian' position, since leaders of the anti-fascist Resistance were involved in this government). (F)actually this is not correct, for Italy was divided into three from September 1943, when the Julian Region was turned into a German Province under the name of *Adriatische Küstenland*. This happened in Daniela's hometown Montona, as it happened exactly in the other Julian areas conquered by Tito's partisans prior to the arrival of the Germans (whereas German troops were quick to annex Trieste after the 8th of September, it took them more than a month to conquer Istria, and would meet fierce Partisan resistance while doing so). This has some importance for the development of the national question within the region, since the power struggles carried out during those years – struggles that would in their turn become the base for discussing political and cultural legitimacy once the war had finished – looked quite different in the Julian Region than elsewhere in Italy. The short period of Partisan

rule in Istria in 1943 and the subsequent establishment of German rule and its intent of Germanising Trieste and its region (see Collotti, 1974), provided yet another context in which to renegotiate the questions of nationality: the political struggle that had divided Italy 'in two' was in the Julian Region accompanied by a restaging of the national struggle, fought between Resistance supporters and 'collaborators', but sometimes fought even within the Resistance movement itself (the most famous example being the events at Porzus, where 'white' non-Communist partisans were killed by 'red' pro-Yugoslav Partisans).

For Daniela the war is a formative experience of a purely negative kind, bringing about the moral (and partly physical) destruction of her hometown. The war confirmed to Daniela the danger of being Italian at the border. As Daniela says herself, 'Italy lost the war, but only her Istria was to pay for it', yet a common viewpoint among the *esuli*. The 'Slavs' were Daniela's real enemy and the real threat, as she and her family saw from an early stage. The Slav Communists won the war and won Istria for Yugoslavia. Had the Istrian people only united in the defence of their towns, the Western Allies might have arrived in due time to save them from the Slav-Communists. Had the Allies only liberated Istria, things might have ended differently. The local Partisans along with the Italian Resistance prevented that. Consequently, the Italian Resistance won. They achieved what they had fought for: a Yugoslav Communist Istria, and anyone who says otherwise is hypocritical in Daniela's view. "We lost, and we paid the price", Daniela says, "but at the least do not take that loss away from us". This 'we' refers to Istrian Italians, but only those who opposed the Resistance. This internal splitting-up of perspectives is of course something common to the Italian war experience as such. But in the Julian Region the national question enters and transforms what elsewhere is 'just' a question of political ideology. To be 'fascist' or 'communist' will from then on never be said or thought of without the adjectives 'Italian' and 'Slav' somehow entering the argument.

Illegitimate 'refugees': the fascist stamping of the exiles in Italy

As it shows, there are several reasons why the exile experience has found little room in Italy's official histories. But as Daniela's story reveals, the one that hurts the most is the popular reaction that she (as so many other exiles) met once upon their arrival in Italy. While still in Yugoslavia, the exiles had been labelled as 'Italian fascists'. The strange thing about the 'Italian-Istrian-exile = Fascist' equation was however its reproduction *within* Italy after 1945, as the Istrians started to flee from Yugoslavia. How is this hostile reception of the exiles to be understood? This was something Istrians of all political convictions experienced with some amazement upon their arrival in Italy. Workers from Pola, for instance, many of whom had been active socialists even during the most fierce repressions of the fascist regime, would be met with great hos-

tility by the Italian workers upon their arrival at the ports of Italy, and often with exactly the same labelling: 'Fascists, go home!'. In Bologna a train full of exhausted and desolated Istrians having left their homes was denied entry into the station by the railway workers, whose Union leaders had threatened a general strike in case the 'Fascists' were allowed to set foot in Bologna. The exiles, in other words, met within Italy the prejudices that according to their experiences and narratives formed part of the dangerously hostile climate that had led to their persecution in Yugoslavia.

While much of what has been discussed above may seem an irrelevant discussion of Italian politics, we have to accept that for the Istrians transplanted in Italy, the question of cultural and national identity was no longer an enacting of self in everyday life. It was not simply a question of being Italian in Italy. Their Istrian-Italian identity was no longer rooted in the securing background experience of their hometown, but had instead become a matter of defending certain interpretations of the past which served to legitimise one's very existence. Istrians came to talk about and understand their own identities in relation to Italian political life, itself split and guided by the cold war dichotomies, possibly more so than elsewhere in Europe. To talk about one's Istrianness became a political demonstration. It was no longer something simply *lived* in silence. Being Istrian was to prove a point, a kind of politicisation of cultural identity in the very concrete and daily sense of that expression. This is tiresome and creates apathy in some, while, for those who wish to enact it, it produces the kind of fossilised approach to every aspect of 'culture' as a sign of one's nationality that seems so dubious and backward to he who has not lost his home.

The Istrian exiles turn to the Right, searching for their nation

The right-wing Istrians and their organizations would in their turn appropriate the national card, make it theirs, and discredit the Italian Resistance as having betrayed the fundamental historical and moral values related to the nation, values and principles (they claimed) going much beyond Fascism and its possible (mis)use of the nationalist issue. *They* had fought for their national pride, *they* had defended Istria against the Slavs, *they* were the real Italians and therefore the real Istrians.¹⁰ That would in the end turn stereotypes and Communist propaganda against the exiles into reality, for, as time went by, the only Istrians who would stand up and speak loudly against the Yugoslav annexation and their wrong-doings in Istria would most often be speaking from a right-wing nationalist perspective, or interpreted by the Italian (not to mention Yugoslav) audience as doing so. Istrian Communists and Socialists would, as a result, keep their mouths shut on the national question, while even the democratic forces came close to adopting a political language imbued with a nation-

¹⁰ For an example on this position dealing with the history of Istria and Trieste, see Grassi, 1960. The forerunner in the Italian nationalist historiography is Tamaro (1924).

alism on the verge of the revanchism typical of the betrayed-by-everyone. That also pre-empted any a-political cultural attempt simply to talk about Istria and constructing one's Istrianness in Italy. To mention the word was politics: right-wing politics, unless proven otherwise.

It is of course no coincidence that the political parties who speak the case of the Istrians, locally and nationally, have traditionally been right-wing. This political 'representation' of the Istrians by the Right signals one thing very clearly to the non-Istrians in the Julian Region: that Istrians *are* indeed right-wing (and tendentially Fascist), as ordinary wisdom goes. However, if Istrians in Italy are more right-wing than the general Italian population¹¹ three conditions need to be taken into consideration: first, the experience of escaping a communist regime will almost automatically push one towards the middle or the right; second, if even the Italian Communists and the Italian workers received the Istrians as 'fascists' (and if the Italian Communist Party officially supported Yugoslavia's territorial rights over Istria and the Julian Region) only the most stubborn and convinced Istrian Communist of Italian sentiment will remain Communist; third, if only the Italian Right will take up the Istrian case in post-war Italy and even build a political rhetoric on the Istrians' own experience of a 'national sacrifice', one's vote will more easily go in that direction. But it should be underlined that these factors do not explain why and how Italian Istrians are traditionally, historically or generically 'essentially right-wing' and tendentially fascist. They do explain something very different indeed: why and how many of them *became* so.

This brings us a long way in explaining the remarkable fact that the Istrian populations in Italy would not only be classified as 'fascist' but would, with time, come close to representing themselves as such. This created an inverse problem for all the Istrians who were indeed anti-Fascist, such as the majority of the working class Italian-Istrian exiles with a background in the socialist movement. These people would be silenced upon their arrival in Italy. This was not a top-down process (there was, all in all, freedom of speech in post-war Italy), but more likely followed from a kind of self-censorship. The hypothesis can be made that most of the formerly left-wing Istrians either turned a-political or that they turned to the Centre-Right in defence of their 'Istrianness' (i.e. that they somehow changed political ideology) or that they remained Socialist but in that case 'forgot' or downplayed their Istrianness within Italy (i.e. that they somehow changed ethnic identification). I deduce this from the observation that many of the Istrians who will not use the term 'Istrian' as a self-definition (unless you get to know them intimately) are in fact left-wing. The Istrians who could not identify with the Right-Wing perspective had a near-impossible task: to construct an Istrianness, or any kind of cultural identity simply linked with one's past and one's homelands, without being branded as a fascist, or a right-wing 'Irredentist'.

¹¹ There is no empirical analysis of the exile electorate to confirm this view. In the *campo di profughi* (the exile refugee camps) the majority of votes likely went to the Christian Democrats (DC).

If, once established in Italy, these people claimed to be left-wing or simply anti-fascist, the local Italian population would not understand why they had left a socialist country in the first place. As one left wing Istrian exile with life-long activity in the Italian Socialist Party told me:

"Now [after the break-up of Yugoslavia] they understand...now they understand how it really was...but then nobody believed us, nobody. For the Italian Left Yugoslavia remained a paradise, and even after Tito broke with Stalin nobody from the Left spoke badly about the country."

If, furthermore, they claimed to have left Istria because they wanted to 'remain Italian', they would almost automatically be classified as 'nationalists', just as the Communist propaganda in both Yugoslavia and Italy had said. To use the argument of 'national defence' was not particularly popular in post-war Italy down on her knees, trying to forget Mussolini's failed project and his fascist-nationalist war-rhetoric built on the primacy of the nation.

From 1945 Italy's political borders to the outside had changed, and indirectly this caused the Istrian exodus. Italy's symbolic boundaries of the inside had changed too, and this made the exodus a nightmare for many Istrians. The Istrians arrived in Italy in a period marked by the Cold War, at a time when most people had lost faith in 'Italy' as a country of past and future splendour and when rival forces contended antagonistically to provide a new political and cultural identity for the nation. Italy after World War II was a defeated nation, and had to be reconstructed on the basis of a new value system. It was this value system, based upon the moral primacy of the Resistance and on a popular-political rhetoric of non-national assertion, that had little place for the exiles. Arriving from Italy's 'unredeemed territories' with a tale of 'national sacrifice' and a strong anti-Communist experience was not the best of positions in post-war Italy and would, especially in the local settings in the industrial northern regions with a dominant Communist politico-ideological hegemony, automatically place one in the wrong camp.

What the Istrian exiles often recognise in Italy as a 'left-wing' positions therefore has to do with more than Communist propaganda. Their anti-Communist paranoia is of course no sheer invention either. That the Italian working class should show no solidarity with the Istrians (but instead with their comrades in Yugoslavia) was something to be read in the Communist newspapers as the Istrians started to arrive. In the leading Communist newspaper (*L'Unità*, February 1947) party secretary Togliatti condemned the exodus as being arranged for anti-Communist purposes by 'Rome'. Even if unintended, such attacks did stamp the singular exile as 'fascist' (the Communist press would only change its aggressive tone after Cominform in 1948, showing newfound solidarity towards the Italian Communists left in Yugoslavia). The Italian Communist Party, the PCI, in several moments after the war accused the Italian Government of provoking the Exodus, repeating the Yugoslav explanation of

the exodus as caused by anti-communist propaganda (identical to claims made by all Communist regimes in the post-war period, as people escaped to the West). The Istrian exiles were to meet this reaction all over Italy and would, not surprisingly, come to see it as an ideologically-infused indoctrination led by the Italian Communists who had successfully continued the communist labelling of the exile as a 'fascist' even within Italy. The fact is that in Italy the Istrians would *also* be seen as fascist-nationalist and treated accordingly.

Carrying the nation within you

One theme constantly resurged to the surface as I interviewed Istrian exiles in Italy: their strong and immediate identification as Italian nationals, a defence of personal identity interwoven with a symbolic defence of Italian territory.

For the Istrian exiles, rebuilding a life in Italy sometimes also includes re-building quite literally one's hometown in miniature, or putting up photos and paintings of one's hometown, one's birthplace, and often also one's church, as in Daniela's and Bianca's small apartment in Trieste. Some of the Triestine exiles' apartments I visited were virtual Istrian museums, displaying also bookshelves filled with Istrian-Italian literature. The rebuilding of (Italian) Istria is therefore also a private affair that goes on within one's four walls. This also involves private commemorations of the Italians who died during the war, or in its aftermath. The most symbolically important 'death' in this context is that represented and symbolised by the death in the *foibe*. Many exiles solemnly celebrate the Fourth of November as the day when Istria became Italian. As one can imagine, they find it somewhat harder to celebrate the 25th of April, the official 'liberation' of Italy. This day, and this period, to most exiles symbolises Istria's loss of Italy, and Italy's loss of Istria. If anything, it is to them a day of mourning.

Daniela's is a story about a nation so close that you could hardly fail to grasp it but that left her town when it had just arrived, and that broke her adult life when it was just about to begin. Daniela's and Bianca's family albums do not just retell a story about their home town: they also tell the story of a nation, from which they have been cut off, and for which, as they say themselves, they have sacrificed everything. The guiding theme in their two albums was the nation as much as it was the family. This is in and of itself an interesting piece of information. Where else in Italy would you find a photo album framed by the historical tale of the Italian nation? Only in its border regions, and only among people whose houses and lands were cut away from the state territory. Among Istrian exiles, in other words. It is a fact that many Istrians feel intimately closer to the Italian nation than do the inhabitants of its capital. Italians have no real national identity, it is often said. Well, I know more than one Istrian who sees the Italian nation as part of their flesh and blood.

However, as our story also evidences, it is a strong sense of national identity that

they have had to defend against more powerful discourses even within Italy itself. And it is here that the exile narrative offers an interesting point of reflection to an understanding of Italy, understood not only as a concrete state territory, but also as a morally imagined community, with changing codes of legitimate membership. While the exile narrative dwells on events of World War II and of the following post-war period, and on the surface seems hopelessly a matter of the past, it is the *reception* of it which invites for further reflections on Italy as imagined, from above and from below, from the centre and from the periphery. It brings a very different perspective to standard accounts of the popular mood and political life in post-war Italy. And it is in this sense that their story is not only one of the past, but also one of the present. For exactly the two themes we singled out for discussion (contesting official history and showing personal pride in the nation), have since the 1990s resurged to the surface in both popular and political discourses in Italy.

While Istrian exiles for fifty years had been telling their stories of the exodus, including the horror tales of the *foibe*, it is only now that the larger Italian public starts to listen. And so, a new road name is appearing all over Italy in these years: *Martiri delle Foibe* (Martyrs of the *foibe*). And while the Istrian exiles for fifty years had to live their strong Italian sentiment as a semi-clandestine identity (unless attached to the value of the Resistance, but we have seen why this was difficult for many Istrian Italians), they can now wave their banner somewhat more openly. And this is exactly what they do. On the 8th November 2001, the Italian President Ciampi told his nation in a public speech that time had come for all Italians to reintroduce the *tricolore* into their private homes. The exile narrative and its symbolic structure may be a somewhat peripheral story of the past. But sometimes the periphery conquers the centre.

ITALIJA OD SPODAJ IN OD ZUNAJ: ČEZMEJNA ISTRSKA ŽIVLJENJSKA ZGODBA MED JUGOSLAVIJO IN ITALIJO

Bjørn THOMASSEN

Ameriška univerza v Rimu, Oddelek za mednarodne odnose, IT-00153 Rome, Via Pietro Roselli 4
e-mail: bjorn_thomassen@yahoo.co.uk

POVZETEK

Prispevek predstavi povojno Italijo, kakor jo je bilo mogoče videti z jugoslovanske meje ter skozi izkušnje "vsakdanjega človeka". Avtor rekonstruira pogled skozi življenjsko zgodbo Istranke italijanskega rodu, ki je po koncu druge svetovne vojne s svojo družino zapustila jugoslovansko državo in odšla v sosednjo Italijo, v Trst, v procesu množičnega prehajanja prebivalstva preko jugoslovansko-italijanske meje, poznanem pod italijanskim nazivom l'Esodo (eksodus). V svojem antropološkem pristopu k zgodovini in spominu avtor uporabi pripoved kot uvod v razpravo o ne-

gotovi identiteti v obravnavanem obmejnem prostoru, ki spregovori tudi o nasprotujočih si interpretacijah dogajanj iz druge svetovne vojne. Tako ponudi alternativen pogled na oblikovanje nacionalnega spomina in identitete v povojni Italiji ter ne nazadnje opozori tudi na aktualno preoblikovanje "Italije" kot imaginarne družbe.

Ključne besede: istrski izseljenci, druga svetovna vojna, spomin, življenjska zgodba, nacionalna identiteta

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