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Ana Kralj PhD

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Work, ana.kralj@fsd.uni-lj.si

Tanja Rener PhD

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Work, tanja.rener@fdv.uni-lj.si

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## **Living on the Border: Three Generations' Biographies**

Ana Kralj  
University of Ljubljana  
Faculty of Social Work  
[Ana.Kralj@fsd.uni-lj.si](mailto:Ana.Kralj@fsd.uni-lj.si)

Tanja Rener  
University of Ljubljana  
Faculty of Social Work  
[Tanja.Rener@fdv.uni-lj.si](mailto:Tanja.Rener@fdv.uni-lj.si)

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## **Abstract**

Borders of nation states are the embodiment of junction between system and lifeworld. They manifest the translation of social into physical spaces and vice versa. The authors reflect the meaning of distinctions and oppositions (us and them, here and there, safety and danger, included and excluded etc.) in construction, maintenance and disappearance of boundaries in space. In the case of borders of nation states the distinctions are identified within and grounded solely upon the political sphere, the same sphere that needs borders and distinctions in order to constitute itself. A qualitative study about the experience and meaning of Yugoslav-Slovenian-Italian border is at the core of the article. Three historical periods are highlighted: the constitution of the border in the years 1953/54, followed by decades up to the entrance of Slovenia in European Union in 2004 and the period of “vanishing and reappearing border” after 2004. The authors believe that the field of “absolute politics” dominated over every day experiences of people living in the border area and – when some turning points occurred – demanded radical decisions and identity transformations.

### **Introduction: Border as Distinction, Metaphor and Discourse**

In his book *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible cities*, 1972 (1974)) the great voyager through imaginary landscapes, Italian writer Italo Calvino, recounts a story of Marco Polo who mesmerized Mongolian emperor Kublai Khan with his tales about imaginary cities. An imaginary city does not have any distinguishable (visual) markers that would enable us to recognize it, which suggests an assumption that we all carry certain notions about places that might not necessarily be figurative or formal but they must provide means to make a distinction. Only after we fill the imaginary with distinctions, it is possible to place within it particularly places, to recognize them, to remember them. Boundaries, even boundaries of the cities, materialized in distinctive symbols are crucial in recognizing reality as they awake cognitive processes and enable us to start cartographing “realized metaphors”. With the help of the boundaries, differences are constructed as metaphors and usually mirrored into space and translated into memory.

The notion of a boundary, especially a boundary in the physical space, is best represented by the difference (differentiation) on the basis of oppositions: inside and outside, here and there, us and them, peace and conflict, order and disorder, security and danger, included and excluded... In the case of borders between nation states, differentiations are identified and justified (including the distinction between access and non-access to civil rights) exclusively in the sphere of politics, exactly the same politics that needs borders and differentiations in order to be able to constitute itself. A very similar process is at work when it comes to constructing identities, spatial and all other: identity, according to Simmel (1950), is only a game of similarities and differences, with the difference more important because only in the difference to something, similarity or equality is created. The simplest way to construct identity (especially ethnic identity) is to make distinctions on the basis of oppositions, which is precisely why the boundaries that only require that a distinctive sign can be translated into a symbol and placed in space, are so important. Ethnic identities usually relate to a certain place, whether real or imaginary, they actually require a spatial dimension, defined by the boundaries. The boundary in space represented as a border between nation states is probably the only symbolic form in which the spatial dimension almost completely overlaps with political and civic form in the sense of civil, political and social rights. Therefore, it may not be surprising that when discussing spatial borders between nation states, some authors turn to the use of metaphors from anatomy when describing borders to be something “more akin to nails than to skin” (Bufon 2006: 29).

In order to construct ethnic or national identities, the existence of a specific comprehensive territory, which plays the role of a real or imaginary (imagined in the sense of Anderson's “imagined community”) home (land) is crucial. It acts as a field of demarcation, which denotes what belongs to “Us” from what belongs to “Others”, while at the same time it provides a reference point, which in turn forms an imaginary identification of the common; therefore, a certain territory does not differ from others only by the external, physical boundaries, but above all through imaginary and institutionalized political (ideological) dividing lines. However, these can be constituted and preserved only if they are constantly narrated, discursively articulated, insofar as the territory is a domain of ceaseless, everyday attribution of meanings.

When asserting that a territorial state is a discursive formation, we emphasize the view that the territory as such has no socially meaningful objective reality. The territory acquires its social significance only by human action in a historical context. Territoriality is therefore never “natural”: of course, it exists in the sense of physical geography of space, but the understanding

of physical space is always a mental artifact, and the meaning of space is attributed. The attribution of meanings is neither complete nor permanent, as people change their attitude to physical spaces. In the case of nation states, changes in the relation to the physical space are usually slow, and in those changes, echoes of past articulations are usually maintained. We could say that the geographical space of nation states is always in the process of simultaneous deterritorialization and re-territorialization. The formation and consolidation of the social space as a national territory is therefore an essential component of the project of creating nation states or nations.

According to Giorgio Agamben (2004), the nation state is a state that makes the principle of its own sovereignty from the coincidence of birth. The fiction that this process contains is that birth as a “natural fact” is suddenly mystically transformed into nationality and usually also into national citizenship. Thus, by being born at the right (or wrong) place and to the right (or wrong) parents, humans suddenly find themselves embedded in extremely powerful social and political/legal “wrappings”. The newborn is therefore an individual whose “natural nudity” is abolished at the time of birth; without having any choice, she/he is incorporated by the state administrative apparatus in a mechanism based on the inclusion/exclusion criterion. The first exercise of authority with which we meet in life, therefore, are inclusionary and exclusionary practices that reduce the living, functioning body into a passive, inscriptive material<sup>1</sup>. Institutionalized differentiating practices and among them perhaps primarily the borders of nation states with their border regimes and border symbols, enable the state to be visualized as a political form, which would otherwise remain rather abstract. The power of the state's visualization depends largely on how the boundaries gain importance in everyday experiences.

The construction of the connotation of boundaries takes place through narratives, stories that provide people with shared experiences, common memories and history, making them feel interconnected. Therefore, narratives should not be understood as mere representation methods, but also as discourses that significantly shape the social practices and everyday lives of people in the way that the boundaries acquire meaning in everyday individual experiences.

## **Method**

On the following pages, we will show how the inhabitants of Škofije, a small village on the very border between Slovenia (part of ex-Yugoslavia) and Italy experienced living on the border in the period since the end of the Second World War until today. During this period, the Škofije border was an important demarcation line, along which two multiethnic states, Yugoslav and Slovenian, were formed. We focused mostly on the discursiveness of the border, narration, attribution of meanings, what has been articulated and what has not been (yet). Because we, the authors, were once residents of the village Škofije, this was also a kind of “participatory research”. In June 2009, we carried out five individual semi-structured exploratory interviews with local residents, on the basis of which we contacted other participants (i.e. snowball sampling) and created three generation focus groups in September of the same year. In each generation group, there were 5 participants, the average age of first-generation participants, born between 1920 and 1930 (marked with A1, A2, A3..), was 80 years, the average age of second-generation participants (B), born between 1950 and 1960, was 55 years and the third generation, born between 1975 and 1982 (C) was 27 years. Biographic method was used in focus groups; the participants were asked about their personal memories and experiences with the border while other biographical information was of secondary importance although everything was registered and later transcribed. We decided to practice biographical narration within the focus groups in

order to stimulate and open up the memory flow of the participants. In 2017, when the border between Slovenia and Italy was temporarily reestablished due to the so called “refugee crisis”, we contacted three people who participated in focus groups once again, because we wanted to hear their comments. We sincerely thank all the participants who shared experiences, thoughts and memories with us.

### The Time of Uncertainty: The Cursed Border (1945-1954)

The village of Škofije, which now counts a little less than 3000 inhabitants, is placed by the road that connects the Slovenian town Koper and the Italian town Trieste. After the Second World War, Koper and its hinterland was an area in which modern industrial development took place with hesitation and delays (Žitko et al. 1992). The inhabitants made their livelihoods by fishing, seafaring, salt farming, agriculture, retail trade and crafts, while the inhabitants of Škofije, which is located merely 10 kilometers from the sea, almost exclusively by agriculture and daily work migration to Trieste. Above all, the first post-war decade was described as a period of insecurity, poverty and fear.

In June 1945, generals Jovanović and Morgan, the former as the representative of the Yugoslav authorities and the later as the representative of their Anglo-American counterparts, signed an agreement according to which the territory of the former Julian March (Venezia Giulia) was divided into occupation zones A and B, separated by a demarcation line, which later became known as “the blue line” or “Morgan line”. Following this division, Anglo-Americans in the Zone A took control over Trieste and its surroundings. The remaining part of Primorska and Istria was controlled and managed by the Military Administration of the Yugoslav Army (Cunja 2004: 28) as Zone B of the Julian March.<sup>1</sup> The inhabitants of Škofije and the nearby settlements found themselves right on the Morgan line, at the border line, which moved a little during the time, but remained a part of their lives and everyday experiences for almost 65 years.

Picture 1: The map of the territory, showing the two zones and the “Morgan line”



<sup>1</sup> The Istrian coastal town of Pula (now in Croatia) was also under Allied administration, forming an enclave of Zone A within the territory of Zone B

Intense geopolitical developments related to the border between Italy and Yugoslavia, as revealed by more recent studies (Gombač and Komac 1997, Škorjanec 2007) culminated in the year 1953 with the famous “Trieste crisis” and then with “reconciliation” after the London Memorandum was signed in October 1954. The period around 1953 was the hardest for the inhabitants of Škofije; temporarily, the border was almost impassable. That was the period of the greatest uncertainty, anxiety and very distressing decisions about leaving.

*“The border was tightly closed, but people crossed it anyway. How many died we shall never know. When I woke up, the early 1950s it was, there were dead people in front of my house... One, two, three...the bodies lay there, waiting for the coroner to take them away. The border was...when you came close to it...no one warned you not to approach, there was just a gunshot. This is the truth; this is how it was in 1953. Oh, how we cursed this border.”* (A1, schoolteacher, 82 years)

*“Yes, people were crossing the border, illegally. Some locals were in business of human trafficking, they made a lot of money. Some were shot because of it. And a lot of goods were trafficked over, too. People had to make a living, somehow, just like today.”* (A3, housewife, 80 years)

*“The times I recall as the darkest...when we were going to Dekani (a nearby village, authors’ note) to a dance night. There was this group of young women and men who were returning to their home village Urbanci later that evening. They were singing aloud! So they could not hear the warning shout ‘Stop!’. They were not even at the border, it happened before the border! It was said the army set up an ambush waiting for a group of deserters, but instead they gunned down this group of youngsters. Two died, two were killed. They were just locals from Urbanci. It happened in the spring of 1952. We attended their funeral in Tinjan.”* (A1, schoolteacher, 82 years)

Such events were very distressing for the local residents *“Oh, how we cursed this border!”* (A1), but they did not react to them, at least not loudly or publicly (*“What could you do? There was no need to explain anything, who would be accountable to us, anyway?”* A3).

Political partitions caused enormous changes in the ethnic composition of the population after 1947, when the number of Italian population dropped dramatically, while new settlers arrived in the rather vacated villages in zone B, mostly those sent by the decree by Yugoslavian authorities. By the year 1954, 2748 inhabitants or 79 percent of the total population left from the area of Škofije and its surroundings. According to authorities, 27.810 people, mostly Italians, but also some Croats and Slovenes left the zone B altogether (Cunja 2004: 89).

Massive emigration happened after 1953, when it became clear that Istria would not be annexed to Italy. Before 1953, people emigrated, but not in large numbers. In uncertain times, people were constantly thinking about their prospects and future, but in 1953, when political events and tensions intensified, it was necessary to adopt the final decision, sometimes literally overnight:

*“Until 1953 the border was kind of open. You could cross over with the identity card, people went over the border and back daily, some were even working in Trieste. But then, in 1953, when Americans gave Trieste to Italy, then the border closed. It really was closed. Closed*

*tightly. And then, there was this conference, this London conference they had and they agreed on the border, some changes were made, Spodnje Škofije, Elerji, Hrvatini, Božiči (local villages, authors's note) were given to Yugoslavia, and the rest of the land to Italy. Well, after they signed the agreement, the end of September it was...they gave people one month to decide. They had one month to decide, whether to return from Trieste to these parts and others had to decide, whether they want to move from here to Trieste. And then some of them...there was some persuasion going on, there was some politics involved, some people were afraid, because life was hard in those times...and many people just left. Whole families...gone over night...*” (A5, sales clerk, 81 years).

In order to trigger and encourage the emigration of the population, the governments on the both sides of the border were working hard. Italian authorities launched a large propaganda campaign to encourage emigration of the Italian population, warned against the violence of the totalitarian regime of the neighboring state, promised jobs and housing in Italy... It seems that the mass movement of people has surprised the authorities on both sides of the border. The Italian state was not prepared for such a massive arrival and had to forget about most of its promises, the Yugoslav authorities realized that emigration in such a scale represented a serious economic and political problem, and therefore they tried to convince people to stay, but it was mostly too late. In the coastal towns of Koper, Izola and Piran, where before the Second World War about 90 per cent of the population was Italian, in 1957 there were only 7.7 per cent left in Koper, in Izola 8.1 per cent and in Piran 15.7 per cent (Troha 1997: 58, 59).

*“Oh, so many of them left, three quarters were gone! They were workers, they lived of their labour, and they feared losing work. It was not so much about the politics, well, politics as well, but politics as propaganda, really. Because many decided to leave even though they had nowhere to go to, but they left anyway.”* (A2, housewife, 82 years)

*“Up on the hill, they (Italians, authors's note) had big loudspeakers and they shouted: ‘Cittadini, cittadini, vi aspettiamo coi camion!’ (‘Citizens, citizens, the trucks are waiting for you’, authors's note). And, indeed, there were many trucks waiting in the village for the people to make a decision and many decided to leave.”* (A1, schoolteacher, 82 years)

Informants belonging to the first generation agreed that the decisive factor for departure has been not so much ethnic affiliation but concern for the means of survival, for jobs in Trieste because it was uncertain what will happen to the border regime in the future. It is most likely that the decision to leave has been triggered by a combination of several factors, ethnicity, fear and uncertainty about the new socialist economic and political regime, political propaganda with invitations, promises and threats.

Many optants and migrants who decided to go to Italy did not come across favorable circumstances on the other side of the border. In the 1950s, the economic situation in Trieste was not good, unemployment was increasing, and many people moved overseas, mostly to America and Australia. In the year 1956 alone, 12.000 people emigrated there (Cunja 2004: 89). For those who decided to move to the Italian side of the border, the Italian government provided some basic housing, but they had to spend many years in the relatively poor conditions of refugee camps and emergency accommodation:



*“They placed them in school buildings, they partitioned the space so the people could live there. They also erected some shacks down there, people had to stay there for years, until they got the money to buy something for themselves...It took a while... oh, yes, for some, they lived there for years...”* (A3, housewife, 80 years)

*“Some left...for America, especially those who could not find work. And young people, they mostly left...”* (A1, schoolteacher, 82 years)

*“When I was a child in the late 1950s, when we went to Trieste by bus, there they were, right over the border, in the shacks, rounded in barb wire. Mixed feelings I had, didn’t like that wire, but there were many children among those barracks, dirty and noisy and from that bus it looked like they were having a great time. I almost envied them, since I had no siblings.”* (B1, professor, 55 years)

*“It might have happened even later, in the beginning of 1960s that some kids suddenly didn’t come to school classes anymore. And there were rumors that they fled to Italy during the night. Such things weren’t discussed publicly, not even among the children, it was like a little secret, a slightly dangerous one. We were well aware that some things were better kept quiet about. Sometimes we carefully observed the shacks down there, in case we might recognize some of them.”* (B2, journalist, 53 years)

In the 1950s, employees of the military, the police, customs officials and teachers were immigrating to Škoflje. Immigration was only partly organized by the new Yugoslav authorities. People received decrees about relocations with which they presented themselves to their superiors, but for everything else, they had to rely on themselves:

*“I arrived in 1952 as a member of customs service. The new border was established and the government wanted to collect duties... and so I came. I was a young woman, I was not married yet... It was hard for me, but I had no choice... I searched for a place to live in shacks and barracks, in cubbyholes, I moved countless times... Finally, as there were abandoned houses near the border, I submitted a request and I got a two-bedroom apartment and I settled there for a while.”* (A4, customs officer, 81 years)

The partition of the area into two zones also caused huge changes in the educational system. Zone B had to establish a school system, provide school facilities and teachers:

*“I received a decree, I was sent here with a mission to establish a kindergarten in Škoflje. On May 1, 1952 ... I arrived in a kind of mini military bus from Koper, my luggage came later, in a couple of days, it had to go through the customs. The schoolmistress was waiting for me, she knew I was coming and she accompanied me through the village and showed me a house which was once a village inn. The inn was closed for years and they used the building for school, they established it in the 1950 already.”* (A1, schoolteacher, 82 years).

At the Škoflje’s crossroad of world ideologies, cultures, languages and traditions... people and especially children, were bilingual, sometimes even trilingual; they spoke or at least understood Slovenian, Italian and local dialect, and used them separately, sometimes even in a

creative mixture. The mother tongue, that is, the one that was spoken at home, did not necessarily match the language that was taught at school, and perhaps not the one that was used among children in the playgrounds. This fully functional Babylonian blend was joined by Serbo-Croat, which was spoken by newly arrived Yugoslav army officers, policemen and customs officers with their families, and later, in the sixties, many immigrant workers from the areas of the former Yugoslavia.

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, linguistic and ethnic differences were not seen as a reason for social categorizations and hierarchies. These were constructed differently and on other ground.

*“There was some differentiation going on among us children, sure thing. Sometimes we picked on someone, teased others, but it wasn't really serious. Those of us who lived in Škofije... sometimes we looked down on the children living in small settlements up on the hills, some of them didn't even have electricity. But we got our fair share of teasing from the kids from Playje (a small settlement on the border with Italy, author's note), they always felt kind of superior, they came from a close-knit community, were somehow richer, had nicer clothes, more toys... all of that originating from Trieste. So we stroke back in the sense: 'Yeah, right, all of you are just a bunch of contrabandists, smuggling stuff to Trieste and coming back with money!'” (B4, secretary, 56 years)*

*“Oh, yes, we felt we were different, outsiders somehow. I should know, since I worked as a teacher in the school. Occasionally, children were brutally honest: 'You're coming here to take our bread from us!' If you hear that from a child... oh, yes, it happened. The locals kept a distance. So I asked Ernesto, our neighbor: 'How come we are considered outsiders while your wife is not?' 'It's different,' he explained, 'she came here to marry, she was not sent here by the authorities like you were'”. (A1, schoolteacher, 82 years)*

*“There were no national or ethnic tensions among us, no... Children on the playground spoke a local dialect. Not Slovenian or Serbo-Croatian or Italian, but 'bastardo' – a local dialect. Yes, people, who lived here, were bilingual or multilingual. There were still Italians among us, but we all spoke Italian to them, had no problem with that at all. Here, in Škofije, there was no differentiation among people, it was not important who is who. We only hated fascism, only fascism! Myself, neither back then or now...Italians...they just speak a different language and that is all. Otherwise, we're all the same. Just people.” (A2, housewife, 82 years)*

*“I can give you an example: there was this man who was working in Trieste but he lived with his family in Škofije. When population census was made immediately after the annexation of this area to Yugoslavia... I was interviewing this man, he had Italian surname Dellasanta, and I put on record Dellasanta, Italian nationality. But the man said: 'If you please, I am Slovenian, I am not Italian' and there were many cases like that. What I want to emphasize is, he didn't declare that because he was afraid, he did it because he was not afraid! This had nothing to do with politics, make no mistake about it! Another example: there was this Italian family living in Forteca (a nearby settlement of 4 houses), they really were Italians, but they had Slovenian surname, because once a Slovenian man married into the family and they kept his surname. They never spoke Slovenian, didn't know the language, why would they? - not long ago this was Italy anyway, so they spoke a local dialect which has been handed down from generation to generation. So when I interviewed him for the census, the man said: 'We speak Italian, you know,*

*but we can't decide whether we are Italians or Slovenians, we are from here, we are locals, who should we be?'"* (A1, schoolteacher, 82 years)

The situation described is reminiscent of what Bauman writes in his book *Identity* (2004). Shortly before World War II, the enumerators in Poland were confronted with unusual problems when questioning respondents about their national identity. Back then, Poland was a multiethnic society in which people of different ethnicities, religions, traditions and languages lived, and at the same time a country in which the political elite worked hard to establish a "Polish people". In spite of all the herculean efforts of well-trained enumerators, nearly a million people could not or did not want to understand what they actually wanted when they were asked about their nationality. They persistently claimed to belong to "these places", that they are "from here", so the inventors of the list of nationalities eventually had to add the category "locals". Authors investigating the inhabitants of Slovenian and Croatian Istria (Sedmak 2005, Brumen 2000) point out similar problems regarding the understanding of nationality.

*"Back then, whatever we felt we are...this national hatred was unknown to us. It was unknown to us, it came later, other people brought it with them..."* (A5, dressmaker, 79 years)

Škofije's ethnic and linguistic mixture was not comprehensible and straightforward for all; migrants from non-maritime regions of Slovenia and Yugoslavia had quite some problems with it.

*"Those people who arrived here from hinterland, they couldn't understand us, couldn't understand a word we were saying, but we understood them. Around here, Istrian dialect was spoken, we spoke 'bastardo'. Those among us who came here from the other parts of Primorska region, we understood Italian language, because we attended Italian schools but Slovenian language was the one spoken at home and we also understood 'bastardo', but other people did not."* (A5, dressmaker, 79 years)

*"Believe me, no one looked at you askance because of your language or ethnicity. Well, those Yugoslav army officers' families, even though they lived in Škofije for years, they mostly kept to themselves, they spoke Serbian among themselves, didn't speak Slovenian, let alone Italian. But that was not the case with their children. When they arrived at school, they were a bit shy and quiet, had quite some problems with classes of Italian language, but not for long. In a year or so, they were one of us, just like us they read little comic books in Italian language, and we adopted lots of Serbo-Croatian words from them. In the fourth grade of the elementary school, I could easily communicate in three, actually four languages, if you count in the local dialect."* (B5, mechanic, 54 years).

### **The Period of Opening Up: Coffee, Dylan and Nutella (late 1960s- early 1990s)**

After 1954, living with/on the border gradually became easier. Several experts of the geopolitical situation have reasoned to conclude that the London Memorandum meant the first example of a relatively peaceful coexistence in the world between two countries with such a different socio-political arrangements (Cunja 2004: 90). Since then and by the end of 1962, Italy and Yugoslavia have adopted several bilateral agreements, which served as a basis for regulating a whole range of issues that were of great importance for living on the border: the payment of

military and civil pensions, optant property, reparations, rail and postal traffic, fishing in the Gulf of Trieste, the marking of a new border line, borderless trade in goods and passage of people... Naturally, there were also political tensions and diplomatic frictions, sometimes even over “banal” issues (for example, the dispute over the amount of cemetery fees was discussed by the Prime Ministers Moro and Stambolić in Belgrade in 1965), which shows that the trust between the countries was relatively weak, and the problem of the final validity of the border remained open. In the 1960s and 1970s, the lives and everyday concerns of locals significantly turned towards Koper which developed with a dramatic pace. The development caused a strong migration inflow, and from 1953 to 1990, the population in the Koper municipality increased by 80 %, in the town of Koper itself by as much as 250 % (Žitko et al. 1992: 176-178). This unbalanced development has caused a number of problems, especially in the hinterland, which were suddenly deagrarized and emptied. However, this did not apply to Škofije and its surroundings. Under new circumstances, people were massively recruited by the emerging local industry, some of them abandoned their jobs in Trieste others kept them and daily migrated to Italy without any problems. The villages and hamlets filled with the new population, which came from other areas of Slovenia and Yugoslavia.

*“There was a huge increase of population around here, employees, workers, and some people even relocated from Koper, because so many people suddenly arrived to Koper. Previously, it was only the factory Lama, there was only one workshop there, and women who were previously doing laundry for people from Trieste, and they began working in the newly established local factories and workshops.”* (A2, housewife, 82 years).

*“When the construction works for Tomos (a motorcycle factory, authors’ note) began, those empty houses up on the hills – because there were so many abandoned houses, so many of the former inhabitants left – they were meant for housing of newly arrived workers. Many of them arrived from all over Yugoslavia, but first the skilled workers from Maribor (an industrialized city in Northeastern part of Slovenia, authors’ note) were brought here by decrees.”* (A5, sales clerk, 81 years).

For the first time, crossing the border meant not only keeping contacts with the family on the other side of the border or economic survival - people started to weigh the costs and benefits of living on either side of the border. Thus, the border was slowly obtaining other meanings, as new opportunities and occasions emerged.

*“My mother was crossing the border regularly for years as she was working as a housekeeper for this family in Trieste. They got along well, were friends, actually, even visited each other on regular basis. Later on, she could have easily gotten a job here, in factories Lama or Tomos, but she said no, in a sense, she was her own boss there, if she felt unwell or if there were things to be done at home, she just called that family in Trieste and told them she will not come for a while. And having some lire (Italian currency until 2002, authors’ note) at hand was really useful, you could buy anything, stuff you couldn’t buy here or stuff that was so much better on the other side of the border.”* (B4, factory worker, 53 years).

*“Things changed somehow when laissez-passers were introduced for people living on both sides of the border. But not many came from the other side, at least not at the beginning. Some*

*relatives came, here and then. And of course it also happened that people from both sides of the border fell in love. Mostly people married and moved to Trieste, though I don't think there were any young men looking for girls from Trieste to marry, it was mostly the other way round. Girls who had boyfriends in Trieste even before all of this happened, they were the ones who got married eventually.*" (A1, schoolteacher, 82 years).

*"These girls were not frowned upon, it really wasn't a big deal for us, and the border was just some sort of necessary evil. These nationalisms that are so often on display these days, they didn't exist among us back then, no, no way..."* (A5, saleswoman, 81 years).

At the end of the 1960s and 1970s, the "border economy", both legal and illegal, intensified. The locals, many of them owned the land on the both sides of the border, had almost no problems, mostly they respected the border regulations because they feared they would lose the permit (*laissez-passer*, authors' note) that enabled them to cross the border.

*"You know what...in Plavje most people were peasants, they lived off the land and they were selling their products in Trieste. I know all about it...my family owned the land on both sides of the border and they were never engaged in smuggling. But they sold the vegetables they cultivated in Trieste, we had relatives in Trieste and they sold everything for us, my family worked on the fields and were transporting fruits and vegetables to Trieste, sometimes even three times per day."* (A3, housewife, 80 years).

*"Back then, there was this regulation according to which you could take one kilogram of meat and one liter of schnapps (a strong alcoholic drink, distilled at home, authors' note) over the border, you were allowed to do it. And the locals did it, most of them did it, selling it to the restaurants and at the marketplaces over the border. And they brought back coffee, washing powder and Nutella for the children."* (A4, customs officer, 81 years).

*"We walked to Trieste with our moms and that kilo of meat and schnapps at least once a week. Literally walked there, because if you took the bus they (police and customs, authors' note) always carefully checked you out. And of course it was us – the kids – who had that extra package of meat hidden on us. Usually it all went well and then, there was so much joy on the Italian side, the ice cream vendor was waiting for us at the bus station, first his cart was on the bike, then motorized. In Trieste, I always asked for Formagino Mio (cream cheese, authors' note), you got a small toy in the package and the cheese was so good I always ate the whole package on the bus back home. You could not find such things in our country, and I found a kind of comfort in that because I always felt a bit ashamed because of that meat I had to carry over."* (B3, technician, 54 years)

*"We never carried anything over the border, just went to Trieste for shopping, to buy shoes and clothes, they were better looking, stylish and cheaper than here. But there was this thing I did every time when crossing the border. There was this old grey asphalt road on our side of the border, right to the boundary stone and then the new, shiny black asphalt road on the Italian side. And I stopped right there, beside the boundary stone, shifting my weight from one foot to another, one foot in Yugoslavia, the other in Italy, for a moment here, for a moment over there..."* (C3, architect, 29 years)

*“When I was little, I sometimes accompanied my grandmother to Trieste, she was cleaning and doing some ironing for this gentleman. I didn’t consider her as a housemaid, I was not ashamed because of that. I was hardly waiting to go with her, she allowed me to help her clean a crystal chandelier – well, it may have been made of plastic, I really have no idea – and afterwards the thing was really sparkling. But the best part came at the end of the day, when we split the day’s earning and I knew she would take me to Steffe (a toy shop, authors’ note) where I would buy a horse for my Barbie doll.” (C1, sociologist, 30 years).*

A more liberal border regime and the occasional shortage of consumer goods in the former Yugoslavia triggered massive shopping trips to Trieste.

*“Suddenly, there were 50 buses at the border crossing at once! Then we had to strip search everyone, go through their pockets (to find hidden money on their way to Italy and to find hidden goods on their way back to Yugoslavia, authors’ note)... Look, if a local woman went to Trieste and said 'I have nothing on me' – that I might believe. But, if a Bosnian woman came in and said 'I have nothing on me'... Wait, you came all the way here by bus and you have no money? And you expect me to believe you?!? So I said 'Where are you hiding the money?' Oh, the stuff I found...! You know, some of them cried, maybe the ones who had to borrow the money for the trip. Of course, I can understand they came here to buy a pair of jeans or a T-shirt for their children. But the clothes they pulled on themselves! Double, triple pair of jeans, you would not believe what they stuffed behind their belts or under their skirts! You cannot imagine! You could find anything, really, anything... There were buses here in Škofije, but trains were also coming directly to Trieste. So many trains...” (A4, customs officer, 81 years).*

Italians were also coming in masses, mostly for cheaper fuel and meat. On this account, Škofije’s micro-economy benefitted substantially.

*“In the 1970s, almost every shop in Škofije was a butcher’s shop. During high school, I was spending my summer holidays working at the local petrol station, cleaning car windows and helping around. I didn’t get paid, only got tips, but the tips were excellent in those days! I bought everything I needed for school, things to wear, and sometimes I just leisurely strolled over the border to Žavlje (a village on the Italian side, authors’ note) and treated myself to a sandwich with mortadella or baccala.” (B4, factory worker, 53 years).*

*“We were not afraid of the border, only occasionally, I’ll explain to you. Back then, Trieste was a really boring place for us youngsters, just an old, dead city, nothing really ever happened there. OK, you could go shopping for clothes, there was some politics going on... Our parents warned us not to go to Viale (the street Viale XX Settembre in the city centre, authors’ note), because fascists were hanging out there, you could even get beaten... Sometimes I was going to Trieste to visit an anarchist group *Germinal* and I brought back their newspapers and leaflets. Then I was a little afraid, you could get into trouble, even into prison because of that. Our government was afraid of the radical leftists, just as it is now, ha-ha!” (B1, professor, 55 years).*

In the 1970s and even more in 1980s, living on the border became less and less of a burden or impediment and increasingly more an opportunity to experience life in two different worlds – in terms of culture, economy, political system. This was the time when living on the border became a comparative advantage, and people could rely on some sort of “geographical rent”.

*“It was a good time for my generation, we grew-up picking the best from the two worlds, records, books, information, culture and counter-culture from the West, while here we had far better social security, good education, good health-care system... It was one of those rare, not just rare, unique moments in history when one had freedom and equality at the same time. And, you know, from childhood on, we were vaccinated against nationalisms. Recon we were socialists with freedom in our hair and a passport in our pocket.”* (B1, professor, 55 years).

In the first days of July in 1991, during the brief Slovenian Independence War, when the Yugoslav army occupied the Škofije border crossing and shut down the border with Italy, blood was spilled once again. Slovenian police force opened fire on a Yugoslav army truck, killing three soldiers and wounding some more.

*“Late Berto observed the scene with his binoculars and saw some wounded youngsters from the Yugoslav army dragging themselves towards the bushes. Went down, carried them one by one on his back, you know, he was a big man, put them into his car and drove them to the hospital. Now, you tell me, who is the war hero? The one who shot those young soldiers carrying bread to their companions on the border or the late Berto who had heart and balls to do what he did? If you ask me, only Berto, only Berto.”* (B2, journalist, 53 years)

*“Back then, I was in Italy for a month and I saw on TV that there is war, horrible things happening, the border supposedly closed. I packed my stuff immediately to go back, my children and my husband were in Škofije. The bus line from Trieste was cancelled, even the taxi driver refused to take me to the border, ‘You won’t make it, the border is closed’ he said. So I went on foot, with my suitcase and three packages of baby diapers I came to the border, there was this Montenegrin army officer, he seemed just as afraid as I was. He didn’t even ask me for papers, only how much the diapers cost. I told him and he said they were expensive, he himself couldn’t afford to buy them for his baby and he let me pass. You see, even in such bleak times, there are this little moments of humanity, and instantly you feel more at ease, less afraid.”* (B1, professor, 55 years).

### **Back to the Future: The “vanishing and reappearing border” (2004-)**

The extent to which the borders (including the Škofije border) are far more than just a simple geopolitical fact is evident by the experience and feelings of our interviewees when reflecting on the "abolition and dissolution" of the border after 2004.

*“How do I feel now? For quite some time, I was still searching for the documents in my handbag...”* (A3, housewife, 80 years)

*“The border stays, it stays in your head for a long, long time... How they shouted at us, when we descended from the bus at the border, all of us workers, domestic workers, mostly*

*elderly, on our way to Trieste. The policemen said – it was already after Slovenia declared independence - “Wait, you old cows!” Today, when I come to the border, I am overwhelmed by a strange feeling and I say to myself: ‘Those ugly days are gone.’” (A1, schoolteacher, 82 years)*

*“Well, somehow I still feel as if the border exists. Although there is no physical barrier any more, when you come to Italy, you come to Italy. I think it is in our heads, a kind of mental barrier, I very much doubt I would ever erase it. Because...their (Italians’, authors’ note) mentality is different, their attitude towards us has not changed much. When you go to Trieste you can still hear: ‘Slovenian, Slav, slave...’ Lately, they are slightly friendlier, probably because they’ve lost the majority of their customers, but you feel the difference, much more here compared to the other parts of Italy.” (C2, unemployed, 25 years).*

*“This thing with the border here...it’s funny. Long after it was abolished, I was searching for the passport every time I approached it. Other places in Europe... I don’t know, when I go from France to Belgium or from Belgium to Netherlands, the situation without borders seems much more natural. It’s probably because this border here was real for me for so long. On the other hand, it is only now, when there are no borders that I realize how stupid and useless they are. How normal and natural it is just to continue on your way and not having to cross anything. Sometimes I wonder how would it be, if – for some reason – the border would be reestablished. Would it be possible for people to accept this as easily as they accepted the abolishment of the border? I hope this wouldn’t happen. I sincerely hope so.” (C1, sociologist, 30 years)*

Nevertheless, it did happen, and quite soon, too. The wars in Syria and Iraq have driven asylum seekers through the Balkan route - a path that usually begins in Turkey and then winds through either Bulgaria or Greece. The migrants then make their way further West, eventually reaching Slovenia or Hungary on the path towards Germany and other Western and North European countries.

In March 2016, Macedonia, Croatia and Slovenia responded to migration flows by announcing that their borders were shut. However, refugees frustrated by the closing of borders still managed to go along the route. This seemed to be the principal reason for Italy's decision in May 2017 to suspend the Schengen rules and to readopt the former “border regime” with Slovenia, which meant that identity documents were once again required. Fortunately, it was a temporary decision which lasted just a couple of months, followed by occasional arbitrary controls. In 2018, we asked three of our focus groups participants, each belonging to a different generation what they thought about the returning borders. Here are their comments:

*“I was not surprised at all”, said a woman of 90 from the first generation (A1). “You know, good things do not last. Frankly, when the border was abolished in 2004, I was happy but didn't quite believe it would last. And I didn't take it so hard, you know, I don't go out much anymore, so it doesn't affect me much. But I feel sorry for the young. You never know, this place is beautiful but somehow cursed, too. We got used to it.”*

The comment of a woman, now aged 63, belonging to the second generation (B1), is different:

*“I was surprised, shocked, rather. Couldn't believe it. We got used to no border controls and it felt so good and now again here they were. This fear coming back, do I have the right*



*documents? What happens if they catch you without them? You know, I see them policemen, Italians, whenever I cross but they never stopped me. Sometimes I even felt ashamed of myself because I was thinking they don't stop me because I am so fair, certainly don't look like them, refugees. Poor people, I feel sorry for them. Sometimes you can see them walking, dark men usually, one, two of them, never more."*

The most political is the view of the youngest of our interviewees (C1):

*"I was not very surprised though I didn't expect it either. I only felt sorry because people just didn't react, they accepted the border as if it was always here. And the refugees... you can see, there is no European politics as far as refugees are concerned. Merkel says one thing while the others disagree. However, even Merkel just wants them because she needs cheap labor. Then you see what the Eastern countries do, forgot about their past and everything. Refugees are the new Jews, aren't they? And did you see on TV what happened here in Škofije when people protested because they don't want to have the asylum seekers living here? Three times they protested, we protested back but we were ten and they a hundred, more even. How far can it go, how far?"*

## **Conclusion**

The three-generational testimonies of life with and on the border narrate how many events happen because of the border, at the border, alongside the border, and at the same time reaffirm the thought that Georg Simmel wrote long ago: that the boundary – both, as a reality and as a metaphor - is the constitutive element that enables the transformation of social space into a physical one (Simmel 1950). In everyday language, the concept of border/boundary is mostly used as a metaphor (for example, boundary between fact and fiction, boundaries between disciplines, artistic genres, etc.), while life along the border is more clearly defined by its physical, tangible, material effects. The boundaries, whether actual (physical) or metaphorical are always real, because we either directly experience or anticipate their distinctive effects. It is therefore not surprising that borders might “feel real” for some, even after they were formally abolished. “The border in the head remains” our informants tell us. First of all, because the experience of the border from the past is still alive, and also because the removal of legal and political obstacles does not mean the erosion of mental and political constraints (“you can still hear insults like ‘shitty slaves’”). Moreover, social differentiations that embody the boundaries often act as performatives: it suffices to pronounce them and they are instantly real.

Social organization is established when the individual and group cognitive structures connect with the objective structures of social reality, or, as Habermas would say, when social system interacts with the lifeworld. This interaction, as our informants narrated, was often dramatically difficult in the border area. There are two topics that we would like to point out: the attitude towards the exodus of part of the local population and the construction of ethnicity and the relationships among members of various ethnic groups. The establishment of the state border and massive exodus of the population in the early 1950s interrupted the territorial continuity and ripped the local social fabric. Local people prefer not to discuss these events. Those who left decided to do so because they were excluded or became excluded because they left. Their departures still lie heavily on the minds of the people who remained: it can be seen in the absence of common memories, in the fact that the departures were not discussed about publicly, not even privately, that the former neighbors were best forgotten. Political and economic

coercion left its mark on everyone: the tragicness of this totalitarian gesture also carved into the lives of those who remained and were forced to withdraw into privacy and silence.

In their narratives, our informants were repeatedly stressing out that "back then, there was no differentiation among us, no interethnic tensions, hatred or nationalism," that all of that came "later and from the outside". Even if we disregard the selectivity of memories and the idealization of the past, there are quite some signs that give weight to their testimonies: the former polyphony of languages in the local community, practical and non-hierarchical linguistic adaptations, the prevalence of local and not national/ethnic identities, high levels of social equality ("there were only workers and farmers living here"). How and why ethnic identities, differences and hierarchies were formed in this area remains to be explored in future, but something is certain: the claim that "nationalism came later and from the outside" coincides with the birth of a nation state, probably both nation states, Yugoslavia first and Slovenia later.

Each narrative speaks of at least one dimension of how the border might be experienced and in our opinion all of them have one common message about how the "political field" (it is probably not a coincidence that Bourdieu's concept of field is also territorial) dominated the everyday lives of people living on the border. Especially in both historically most important periods of establishing borders of the nation states (around 1953 and 1991) this was not only a common, profane politics as a play of interests and power relations, but above all an "absolute politics" (Pizzorno 1993), a sacralized, theologized politics of "greater good" and "ultimate truths" that required radical decisions and identity transformations. In the intersection between the (political) system and the lifeworld, people made different decisions, sometimes even unusually brave ones. In the case of Škofije border, it turned out once again that nation states are born out of sweat and blood but – as usual – not the sweat and blood from the kings and queens but out of the blood of pawns from the periphery.

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