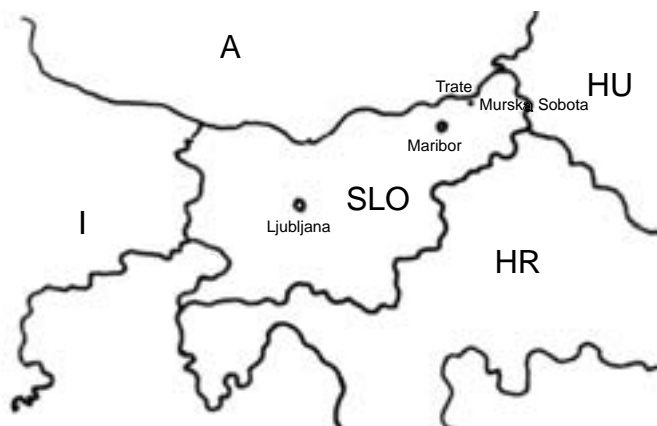


4. Destinies of the post-war colonists in the village of Trate: Unintended phenomena in the appropriation of public spaces

Rajko Muršič

»Takšen drek v moji glavi
sem bolj na robu a ne zapiram oči
sem za domovino sem za sistem
a sploh ne razumem toliko stvari.«
Butli

[Such shit in my head
I'm more at the edge, but won't close my eyes
I'm for my country, I'm for the system
But don't understand so many things.]



Introduction

It is impossible to understand the present without consideration of the past, but it is also misleading to consider the

future in terms of a destiny determined by the past. If there were no socialist revolution, there would be no specific present in Eastern Europe. However, the future of this part of the world is in no way determined by its socialist experience. If we are trying to comprehend the turbulence of the recent period in this part of the world, we have to consider the specific ontology of the long-term, middle-term and short-term past. Their disjunctive “presence” is not only a matter of profound interpretations or the “actual” scope of their impact. In the public sphere, it is also the result of various kinds of analysis and comparison.

The “real” events have happened in the past, but there is no single “objective” past in the present. We always have to deal with many historical interpretations derived from it. Furthermore, the past is itself plural: as much as it is experienced, it differs as much as different personal experiences. Every agency has his/her/its own past.

If we use the term history as the overall category describing our past, we can easily miss unrecorded, unnoticed and solipsist experiential facets of everyday life and individual life (hi)stories, as well as historically unrecorded or forgotten remains of ancient times present in habitus. Although our perceptual apparatus (including senses of taste, see Bourdieu 1984) is shaped socially, perception is experienced individually. Therefore, it is not entirely solipsist (as early Wittgenstein has warned – see 1976). It is essentially individual. That is why it is sometimes good to individualise both, the past and history.

Post-socialism is our reality, and we should neither simplify nor mystify it (I expressed my views on “transition” in Muršič 1999). The case I will present here is typical in some ways but atypical in others. The village of Trate, in which I have been doing fieldwork between 1993 and 1998, witnessed changes throughout the 20th century. Between 1901 and 2001, the villagers lived in five different countries and experienced four different political systems (including Nazi occupation/annexation and Yugoslav socialism); they were involved in several waves of emigration, immigration, expul-

sion and colonisation; almost the entire population was replaced at least twice and the villagers faced modernisation and other radical economic changes as well.

Trate was transformed from an almost entirely agricultural village into a typical village that represents the Slovene urban-rural continuum (on the term see Ravbar 1989). Last but not least, the village hosted the legendary Slovene alternative rock club and several local punk rock groups. The latter was in fact the reason of my interest in the village. The development of a local “scene” in such a village was a natural experiment reflecting general processes of “globalisation” in one particular location.

Although I visited the village – and its famous youth/rock club – for the first time in the middle eighties I did fieldwork much later, in the post-socialist nineties. Can the localised fieldwork experience bring some new light to the specificity of post-socialism? Definitely, although my observations would hardly prove any substantial impact of the political change on the everyday life of the villagers, especially not with regard to younger villagers living their everyday life in the eternal present (these observations confirm the experiences of an observer of the Russian youth in the nineties – see Markovitz 2000).

The only immediately recognisable breaks were connected to public life, beginning with the closing of the village club in 1994, employment problems and regressive changes in the Slovene ideoscape (on the term see Appadurai 1990) in general. I will describe them in more detail later.

Naturally, there were other, more favourable changes as well, starting with basic political, individual freedoms and civil rights, improvement of the conditions of everyday life and individual living standard with availability of new commodities, equipment and materials. In contrast to the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, political and economic changes in Slovenia were neither rapid nor radical, but rather evolutionary and gradual. Transformation was slow and is even now not yet fully completed, especially concerning the privatisation of the banks, insurance companies and some major

industrial facilities. After all, Yugoslav socialism had itself introduced many elements of the market economy and private initiative in the sixties, however restricted this development may have been.

Another distinctive feature of the Slovene (or, more generally, Yugoslav) transformation and the fall of communism was the dissolution of the federal state and the following descent into war. This was perhaps the only rapid change experienced in Slovenia. Therefore, it is rather difficult to distinguish between the end of socialism and the dissolution of the former federal state (on that point see Muršič 2000a).

The village of Trate in the turbulent twentieth century

Trate is a village in northeast Slovenia, at the border with Austria. It is situated on the small hills above the southern banks of the river Mura which forms the border between the two countries. The region was colonised in the Middle Ages, when the castle Upper Mureck was built on the hill above the river. On the northern bank of the river Mura, the borough Mureck (Cmurek) became a local trade, traffic and administrative centre. Since the late Middle Ages it had been settled mostly by a German speaking population. The region was a part of the Styrian Dukedom (Land), integrated in the Habsburg Monarchy for more than a millennium. The village of Trate happened to become the southernmost village with a German speaking population in Styria. Although many townspeople in the southern part of Styria used the German language in everyday communication, and many villagers north of the present-day border between the Slovene and the Austrian part of Styria spoke Slovene, Trate was located exactly at the boundary between the Slovene and German speaking population of Styria. In the nineteenth century, the majority of the nearly 400 villagers of Trate (German *Wiesenbach*) spoke German language, while in the neighbouring village, Zgornja Velka, the villagers spoke Slovene (see, e. g., Krempf 1845; Krones 1879; Specijalni 1893; Beg

1905; Gawalowski 1914; Mell and Pirchegger 1914; Janisch 1979, 1980; Grafenauer 1994).

After a relatively peaceful first decade of the twentieth century, with only some latent conflicts provoked by the attempts of the recently emerged German- and Slovene-speaking elites from the area to impose general education either in the German or Slovene language, the First World War ended with the disappearance of the Austrian/Hungarian Monarchy. In the region, many new states and borders emerged.

The northern border between what remained of the Austrian part of the Habsburg monarchy and the new Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (preceded for two months in October and November 1918 by the State of the Slovenes, Croats and Serbs) was finally determined in the Treaty in St. Germain in 1920. The new border at the river Mura (German *Mur*) cut the borough Cmurek (German *Mureck*) from its southern surroundings, and, of course, broke the ties between relatives and inhabitants on both sides, affecting the German and Slovene speaking population the same way. Until 1923, the villagers from Trate still went to the parochial Catholic church across the river in Cmurek, but later they were incorporated into the parish Marija Snežna in Zgornja Velka. Communications and contacts across the river remained lively, but the state border was a new, crucial fact.

Some German-speaking people of the region became anxious because of the newly established South-Slav state, especially regarding military service in the "Serbian" army. With the uncertain economic and political situation, the anxiety grew. Therefore, some German-speaking farmers sold their property and moved to Austria or Germany. People from Prekmurje, the nearby region which was annexed to Slovenia (The Kingdom) after the WWI from the Hungarian part of the empire, bought the property and began to resettle the region. In Trate, some eight families (from 50 altogether) sold their property in the twenties and thirties.

Nevertheless, the majority of German-speaking farmers remained in the village of Trate and the surrounding area. In

the thirties, they gradually began to accept and support the Nazi ideology, massively joining the organisation *Kulturbund* (which was illegal till the late 1940). This organisation actually paved the way for German (and Austrian) occupation of the Yugoslav Kingdom in April 1941. After 1938, they openly started to provoke local Slovene inhabitants and representatives of the state with demonstrations in favour of Adolf Hitler and his growing Reich. Such demonstrations (called *Aufmarsch*) were turned into violent riots in the village of Trate only a few days before Yugoslavia was attacked and occupied.

In 1941, the local Nazis drew up lists of people who were to be expelled to Croatia and Bosnia. From Trate these were the farmers (with all their families) who had moved to the village after WWI from Prekmurje, as well as some local intellectuals and members of the elite (for example a wealthy miller, a local priest and teachers). Their property was confiscated in the name of the German Reich and settled with people loyal to the Reich. From the village of Trate, 26 people (seven families) were expelled. In 1945, they returned to their homes. Soon after, those who sympathised with the Nazis suffered the same fate.

Building of the new world: Post-war colonisation and its unintended consequences

In January and February 1946, all members of the *Kulturbund*, i. e. mainly those Styrians who were recognised as the so-called *Volksdeutsche*, were expelled, together with their dependent children. Their property was confiscated in accordance with the act of reparations, which had been adopted during the war by the Slovene and Yugoslav partisan-led government. At the same time, within some hours or days, the same property was resettled by the new “colonists” (as they were officially called) from various parts of Slovenia.

Austria and Germany were obliged to accept the expelled people and provide them material assistance for their new start. It was a part of the international agreements and contracts between the occupying and occupied countries regard-

ing war reparations. Thus, some of the expelled members of the *Kulturbund* started anew with even better conditions in their new country. For example one of my informants explained that his relatives were so satisfied with their situation in Austria that they prayed for Tito's good fortune in their gratefulness. But not all of them were that lucky.

The position of the new colonists in the village of Trate was not favourable at all. They were given no more than 5 ha of property; they were obliged to work as farmers and were not allowed to take jobs in industry. It is obvious that this amount of property could not provide a substantial income. Therefore, they were expected to establish and join a new socialist agricultural co-operative. It is important to note, however, that land reform of this sort was not common in the socialist Yugoslavia. As a matter of fact, the socialist government did not try to confiscate all the farmers' property to establish larger co-operative ("communal") farms. Instead, it set limits on the size of individually owned properties. The implemented limitation on property ownership was 10 ha (plus no more than 20 ha of forests) which was, of course, quite small. The result was obvious: the process of rapid reduction of the number of people employed in agriculture (and the simultaneous industrialisation).

Only for a short period of time (between the late forties and early fifties), and only voluntarily were some co-operative farms established. Among them was the co-operative farm (*zadruga*) in Trate, established in 1949. Most of those who joined the farm were new colonists. After two years, many families left the co-operative, and the experiment finally came to a conclusion in 1954 (more on the destiny of the co-operative and colonists in Muršič 2000b: 370-377, 394-396).

In the late fifties many colonists returned the property back to the state or sold it. Only a few of them remained on their new farms and even most of these, eventually, found jobs in industry. Contrary to the pre-war agricultural settlers from Prekmurje, these people were not born as farmers. They were servants, bailiffs or people without any property, working occasionally for their landlords on fields or in vineyards. It was

difficult for them to adjust to the new situation. Only a few of the forty colonist families that settled in Trate in 1946 still live there today, and only one of the colonists in Trate still works as a farmer (even he was employed in a factory until his retirement). The majority of them moved to town to find work. Some of them simply did not have any luck – alcohol was a major problem which some of these families had to face.

In the post-war period, the shape of the village changed constantly. Many villagers found jobs either in the paper mill factory Paloma, in Sladki Vrh, or in the industrial town of Maribor. Others found work across the border in Austria. Some people moved out, other moved in. Among the newcomers were agricultural workers employed in the large agricultural economy (Kmetijska zadruha Lokavec-Trate, later incorporated in Agrokombinat Lenart). Some of them were highly educated agronomists. These agronomists and some police officers took up residence in apartments in the Upper Castle. Near the bridge over the river Mura, border administrative workers settled. Furthermore, in the sixties, two blocks were built across the road near the Lower Castle for employees in the asylum (psychiatric hospital) which was located in the building of the old castle. With the arrival of some other newcomers who built their houses in a typical suburban style, the professional and social structure of the village changed significantly.

The everyday life under socialism was not at all depressing or tragic. On the contrary, a new (socialist) public life was introduced to the village. Daily life improved progressively and radically. Gradually, the village received electricity, modern roads, water supply and other infrastructural necessities. With a better education, the younger generations were in a position to shape their own worlds with local cultural and leisure activities. The unintended new era had indeed begun: the era of popular culture (by “popular culture” I mean culture mediated by mass media) in the rural-urban continuum of the northeast Slovenia resulting from the gradual suburbanisation of the countryside.

Socialising differences based on the judgements of taste

What was important for the village in the second half of the century were venues of the newly emerged local “public culture”, i.e. public places where people – especially youth – would meet, communicate, socialise and participate in common activities. There were two castles in the village inherited from the feudal era. Both offered enough space for public activities.

In April, 1948, young women who belonged to the village branch of a women organisation (the so-called Anti-Fascist Women’s Front) reconstructed and adapted the existing reception room in the Upper Castle. It functioned as a public hall for organising local leisure and cultural activities. The so-called Communal House (*Zadružni dom*) soon became the centre of the new village public culture. The village youth organised educational lectures, public celebrations, dance parties and theatre shows. Thus, in the fifties, extraordinarily lively and attractive amateur theatre scene developed in Trate and in the surrounding villages. Occasionally, in the venue of *Zadružni dom*, they also organised public consumption of radio, and later television programmes (the Slovene national television started to broadcast in 1958). Therefore, the emerging village “public culture” was essentially shaped both by post-war popular culture and by the “official” cultural policy of the authorities, which were striving to “improve” the general level of local culture. It can be said that the majority of villagers who grew up in the late forties and the early fifties, was socialised in quite a different “society” than their parents. Their leisure-time activities provided an opportunity to establish close ties with other individuals from their peer-group. These close relations – resulting in generational networks – still play an important role in the life of the village. They were important in the eighties, when community members decided to build a common water system and persuaded other villagers to join, or even more recently, when they organised celebrations within the framework of the local pensioners’ organisation.

In the late fifties, when the first post-war generation had reached maturity, the “Communal House” slowly sank into oblivion. As far as individual living standards were concerned, the most profound changes were initiated with the electrification of the village between 1955 and 1964. Among the first electric devices people purchased for their homes were radio receivers.

Slovene popular music of that time completely changed the musical taste of the younger generation(s). Almost immediately, they started to play music they heard on radio. It was a Slovene version of Alpine polka music, literally called “folk-entertainment” music (*narodno-zabavna glasba* in Slovene). The “*Ansambel bratov Avsenik*” which started to perform in 1953, became the most influential group – not only in Slovenia, but also in Germany, where they sold several million records under the name “Die Originale Oberkreiner Quintet” (on the group see Sivec 1999). The first such group in this region was “*Veseli fantje s Trate*” (The Joyful Fellows from Trate) who started to perform in local pubs and venues around 1958.

In the mid-sixties, this new generation – which was obviously enthusiastic about “folk-entertainment” – established a new public house in the village of Trate. This time they named it simply the “Youth Club” (*Klub mladih*). It was partly a result of the official policy of the socialist youth organisation in the early sixties. The village youth who ran the club was predominately oriented toward leisure activities (organising dance parties and sport events). Some of them still played the above mentioned Slovene ethno-pop music with accordions, trumpets and guitars. But they also bought a gramophone and played popular Croatian, Italian and British pop songs (occasionally they would even play some records by the Beatles or the Rolling Stones). Needless to say, individuals from this generation still communicate and co-operate with each other – after all, they held the leading positions in the village in the nineties. Without the common experience of socialisation and shared preferences in taste, as well as in their basic world-view, they could have not found consensus

so easily. At the local level it was clear that the differences in taste were far from being unimportant (on the differences of taste and “class” see Bourdieu 1984).

The same story of decline occurred again in the seventies, when the local youth club ceased to operate. The generation, which led the venue in the sixties, grew up, got jobs, married, and, subsequently, lost interest in meeting in the club.

After a few years, however, it reappeared once more. In November 1979, the following generation of the local youth established a new club. This time it was named “*Mladinski klub Trate*” (The Youth Club of Trate) and, later, became the famous Disco Trate. In the eighties, the club became widely known, thanks to its radical punk orientation.

In the early eighties, the well-known local punk scene emerged in Trate with five punk rock groups, which started to rehearse in the club. Within the framework of the local branch of the socialist youth organisation they regularly organised concerts and parties. It is important to add that younger women played a major role in the club. In 1986 and 1987, when people from the leading Slovene weekly, *Mladina*, regularly visited *Disco Fotogrupa M Trate*, the local venue became nationally known and important.

First punk rock groups in the area were established in 1979, in the villages of Trate and Selnica ob Muri (*Butli* and *Masakr*). In 1984, after they split up, the leading group from the scene in Trate, CZD (*Center za dehumanizacijo* – Centre for Dehumanisation), was established. The group is still active. Moreover, it became one of the legendary Slovene underground punk rock groups, regularly touring in Austria and Germany (on the group see Muršič 1995).

As might be expected, the scene in Trate declined in the early nineties. This time, the inevitable generation gap was not the only cause of its disappearance. The venue was closed due to its privatisation. In February 1994, the building of the mill was given back to the heirs of the pre-war owner. Denationalisation, as the process of the restitution of the nationalised property to the pre-war owners was known, final-

ly brought to an end not only socialism, but its unique (post)socialist “public culture” as well.

And this brings us into the seemingly turbulent last decade of the century. Trate is now a part of the typical north-east Slovene scenery within the urban-rural continuum, with well-designed, clean and neatly arranged suburban private houses. The most visible characteristics of the surroundings are the freshly mown lawns at the front of the private houses. CZD’s song entitled “*Pokozlane Trate*” (Vomiting Trate/Vomited lawns) throws an ironic light on the emerging small-townish Europeanism.

People in Trate were anxious about the changes following the fall of socialism and the economic crisis in the late eighties and the early nineties. Some of them searched for jobs in Austria or found other ways of earning some money. Generally, the situation is not too dismal, although the village is facing the problem of ageing and depopulation. If the paper mill, Paloma, in the neighbouring community of Sladki Vrh goes bankrupt, the fate of the people around Trate would become uncertain.

Thankfully, this is not the end of the story. The semi-rural area near the border is a place with a highly developed alternative culture. The mature scene – led by the middle-age rockers, with the support of some younger people – simply moved to another venue in the village of Ceršak, some 10 km from Trate. Under the leadership of a member of CZD, Dušan Hedl, they established a genuine cultural centre in a private house near the border.

Eternal underground: A new public culture and private initiative

The alternative rock scene in Trate came to an end when the venue in the old mill was given back to the pre-war owners. The Act of Denationalisation, passed in 1991, was among the typical counter-revolutionary acts with which a new post-communist elite was made. Its members were heirs of those individuals whose property was confiscated or nationalised after WWII. The policy of giving the pre-war property back to

its former owners “in kind”, not in shares, caused new social injustice. The youth and rock club in Trate was not the only victim of this “denationalisation”.

Alternative and local public culture had to adjust to the new situation – or to disappear. The first apparent problem for alternative culture was the finding of venues. In the nineties, vital civil society movements of the eighties had lost their meaning. However, the struggles of alternative movements continued. In two main cities of Slovenia, Ljubljana and Maribor, rebellious youth occupied empty army barracks. These “squats”, which were occupied in 1994, are now centres of a new Slovene alternative culture. Some youth clubs and other venues survived and continue to struggle against the dominant system – now commercialised capitalism – within the so-called “liberated territories”.

The alternative culture thus faces the new rules of the market, often existing and producing under awful conditions.

In smaller towns and villages in Slovenia, the situation is sometimes favourable and sometimes quite unfavourable. The scene in Ceršak is becoming more and more important. In a reconstructed private house, the members of CZD built a club and a gallery, made a recording studio and equipped an office for the cultural institutions which were established in accordance with the new legislation: the society “*Zid na meji*” (The Wall at the Frontier) and the private non-profit organisation “*Subkulturni azil*” (Subculture Asylum) with the record label Front Rock and the publishing house Frontier. It seems that private initiatives of this kind can also aid in the preservation of resisting alternatives to capitalism. We shall see.

Local alternative scenes were inevitable unintended consequences of the socialist project. It is more or less obvious that also capitalism initiates its own unintended phenomena. Capitalism is perhaps the most efficient political and economic system so far, but that does not mean that it cannot devolve into new forms of hegemony and usurpation.

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