VOICES HEARD (AGAIN): ISTRIAN ITALIANS IN AND OUT OF ISTRIA

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LIDIJA NIKOČEVIĆ
Etnografski muzej Istre / Museo Etnografico dell'Istria, Pazin

The emigration of Istrian Italians after the Second World War, most often called the "Exodus", has been a frequent topic of many historical and anthropological studies. This paper reports on new findings based on the EU project *Identity on the Line*, which studied and interpreted a series of involuntary migrations and unwanted consequences for peoples, communities and individuals in Europe in the middle of the 20th century. In the research of the Istrian "Exodus", an effort was made to find new testimonies and stories and reach voices that had not been "heard" thus far. In this process, it became obvious that the status and fate of the Istrian Italians who did not emigrate, the so-called "Rimasti" (less studied so far) is very complex due to the ambivalent relationship with the emigrated Istrian Italians (the "*Esuli*") as well as with the newly created social environment. Photographs and statements from both communities were collected and meant to be used for two exhibitions, films and publications, thus bringing to light their intimate accounts (some of which were told for the first time), presenting them in a public space. This transformation necessarily implied very careful and sensitive cooperation with the informants, with the aim of making their traumas more visible, as well as establishing museums as institutions where increased efforts are made to communicate "difficult heritage".

Keywords: involuntary migration, traumatic past, difficult heritage, Istrian "Exodus", museums

The project *Identity on the Line* (I-ON), undertaken within the framework of the EU Creative Europe[1] program, largely focused on forced or unwilling migrations in the recent past in Europe, together with the mistreatment and humiliation of certain ethnic groups and individuals for ideological reasons. Among seven countries whose museums[2] have

[1] Creative Europe invests in actions that reinforce cultural diversity and respond to the needs and challenges of the cultural and creative sectors.

[2] Six museums and one university have been working on the I-ON project. The leading institution is Vest-Agder Museum from Kristiansand (Norway) and the remaining partners are the House of Knud Rasmussen

participated, a Croatian museum – the Ethnographic Museum of Istria – was selected to work on the problem of post-World War II emigration from Istria.[3]

One of the key intentions of the project was to empower museums as institutions to take on a central role in communicating social themes ("difficult heritage"),[4] including the dissonant heritage that is still negotiated by different participants or holders of that heritage. What is of the utmost importance when doing so is giving a voice to the collaborators, informants who had participated in the fieldwork and the process of collecting material for the exhibitions. This role of the museum has not been very prominent in the Croatian museum tradition, where most museums have been rather affirmative toward cultural heritage, which has often been shown as unproblematic and representative. However, there have been some exceptions, especially when it comes to occasional exhibitions taking an anthropological approach.

Nevertheless, there is a museum with a tradition of problem-oriented exhibitions and of work dedicated to emigrated communities and individuals. This is the Ethnographic Museum of Istria, which is why it was selected to participate in this EU project.[5] A decade ago, it organized the exhibition *Valiže & Deštini* (Suitcases & Destinies) – Istria out of Istria"[6] that, for the first time in Croatia, presented the issue of Istrian emigrants in the form of a museum exhibition (Nikočević 2015). *Suitcases & Destinies* dealt with ethnographic aspects of Istrian emigration (which some call "exodus", and others "displacement"). The focus was on the similarities and differences in the experience of Istrians living outside of Istria. While not attempting to show the totality of the emigrant experience, attention was drawn to the complex, diverse and multi-layered destinies of displaced Istrians, as well as to the content ("suitcases") of their memories and perceptions of Istria.

The research conducted as part of that project provided a good starting point to continue work on Istrian emigration. For the *Identity on the Line* EU project, post-World War II emigration (mostly towards Italy by the predominantly Istrian / Italian population) was selected. This emigration still remains the subject of varying national discourses that result in contesting histories from the two emissive countries (Croatia and Slovenia) and Italy.

(Danmark), Ájtte – the principal museum of Sami culture (Sweden), the Museum of Middle Pomerania in Słupsk (Poland), the University of Vilnius (Lithuania), the National Museum for Contemporary History in Ljubljana (Slovenia) and the Ethnographic Museum of Istria in Pazin (Croatia).

[3] The project website, https://i-on.museum/, includes many results of the various sub-projects.

[4] "[…] difficult heritage' – that is, a past that is recognized as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity. 'Difficult heritage' may also be troublesome because it threatens to break through into the present in disruptive ways, opening up social divisions […]" (Macdonald 2009: 1).

[5] Since 1997, the Ethnographic Museum of Istria has strived to undertake projects analyzing the multi-layered Istrian culture, it has questioned stereotypes about culture(s) in Istria, it organized research, exhibitions, meetings and conferences with the neighboring countries and participated in several international EU projects.

[6] The exhibition won the award for best exhibition in 2009 presented by the Croatian Museum Society, and the book based on the exhibition won the award for best museum project presented by the Croatian Ethnological Society in 2011 (Valiže & Deštini – Istria out of Istria 2011).

Each side cites different numbers of those who emigrated and reasons why they left, and uses different names for the event. The term "Esodo" has been used by the Italian side, stressing their point of view that they were no longer welcome in Istria and that, in a way, they were not able to stay there. Therefore, the term "Esodo" is more closely associated with refugee status, rather than the general term "Emigration". Given that "Esodo" is widely used today (including in Istria), it is also used in this text as English "Exodus", without necessarily sharing the same point of view.[7]

LEAVING ISTRIA: NUMBERS, CONDITIONS AND REASONS

Much has been written after World War II about the "Exodus" of Istrian Italians from the historical perspective. Many writings – when Italian, Slovenian and Croatian authors are compared – have an ideological background (or are used by ideologues) and differ to a great extent in their narratives. A comprehensive overview and analyses of Croatian texts on the topic written by historians and journalists is presented in Franko Dota's book *Zaraćeno poraće* [The Post War at War] (Dota 2010), where Dota also included some relevant Italian texts and analyses of circumstances that led to the creation of contesting histories. Among texts published in the last ten years, the book written by Šenol Selimović *Esuli između politike, prava i demokracije* [The *Esuli* between Politics, Law and Democracy] amply documents both the historical events of the 20th century that resulted in the population transfer as well as recent activities of the "*Esuli*" in Italy, Italian politics related to the "*Esuli*", and characteristics of Italian-Croatian relationship concerning the "*Esuli*". In a text on the recent Italian literature about "the east boundaries", Vanni D'Alessio (2012a) critically analyzed more recent Italian historiography. The contemporary situation in Italy related to the "*Esuli*" is contextualized within recent Italian politics in texts by Federico Tenca Montini (2014, 2016) and several other researchers, to whom I refer in the text. In the context of this research, books by Raoul Pupo (2005) are also highly relevant. Pupo has devoted the last two decades to the study of the Istrian "Exodus", as evident in his book *Il lungo esodo. Istria: le persecuzioni, le foibe, l'esilio* [The Long Exodus. Istria: Persecutions, Sinkholes, Exile] (Pupo 2005) as well as other texts, including one dealing with the problems of comparative history of the North Adriatic after the two world wars (Pupo 2012).

A particularly extensive insight into displaced Italian Istrians' organizations and associations in Italy and their role in the politics of dealing with the "*Esuli*" was provided in *Esulski skrbnici* [The Guardians of the Exiled] by Sandi Volk (1999), whereas his later monograph, *Istra v Trstu* [Istria in Trieste] (2003), offers the historiography of the "Exodus", a descrip-

[7] The term "Exodus" has been used mostly by Italian historiography, stressing the biblical, catastrophic connotations of the unwilling transfer of people from Istria, which could therefore be understood as an ideological position. Given that I have attempted to be as ideologically neutral as possible, I am using it in quotation marks.

tion of regulations for the reception of Istrians in Italy, as well as laws and organizations related to the process.

In this article I will not attempt to provide a historical overview of the Istrian "Exodus" (which can be obtained from the sources mentioned above), but I will briefly refer to data relevant for its understanding. Italian sources often mention that 350,000 Italians left Istria, the Rijeka region, the islands of Cres and Lošinj, and the city of Zadar, while Croatian and Slovenian sources emphasize that not much more than 400,000 people in total lived in Istria at the time. Therefore, the estimated number of exiled people should be around 225,000 (Žerjavić 1993: 642–643). Moreover, many Croatians and Slovenians[8] left as well, because they did not agree with the politics of post-war Istria, the complete change in ideology (and much of the social and public life in general). Some simply looked for new opportunities in life, and many of those did not stay in Italy, but left eventually for America, Australia, Canada or western Europe. This is also one of the reasons why it is particularly difficult to determine when the migration was forced and when it was voluntary. In his work *Esuli ali optanti?* [The Esuli or Optants?] Jure Gombač, a Slovenian sociologist, cites Anthony H. Richmond who claims that, in the contemporary world, it is difficult to tell the difference between economically motivated migrations and those that are a result of political factors. Therefore, the line between voluntary and involuntary migration is very vague. Almost all cases have elements of both reasons (Gombač 2005: 36). This can certainly be applied to many Croatians and Slovenians who left for Italy and – as with most "*Esuli*"[9] – many of them, after spending several months and years in refugee camps, departed for the USA, Canada or Australia.

For most emigrating Italians, everything suddenly changed after the war, and they felt that they were foreigners in their own land. Nationalization of property, suppression of public visibility of religious practices, renaming of streets and squares, new rules at every step made life very difficult. They could not express themselves in the language of the new regime, and gradually the majority of the population spoke the new language, since the number of remaining Italians decreased daily. The most uncomfortable and threatening feeling was fear. Several hundred – if not thousand – of Istrian Italians were tortured and/or murdered, often in karst pits ("foibe") during and after World War II, as revenge by partisans and the new authorities on those who were suspected of being former fascists.

[8] The divisions and dichotomies between ethnic and national sense of belonging, between languages spoken (Italian and Croatian/Slovenian), and between town and village cultures in Istria were often much more fluid in practice than interpreted and constructed in nationalistic narratives (see D'Alessio 2006; Verginella: 2008).

[9] Although the colloquial term "*Esuli*" dominates references to emigrated Italian Istrians, some authors, such as Šenol Selimović, (Selimović 2015: 50) point to the fact that the "*Esuli*" are those exiled Istrians who fled from Istria from 1943 to 1947, and therefore were not eligible to receive compensation for their lost assets and civil rights. Those who left after 1947 were given a chance to choose between two citizenships. If they chose Italian citizenship, they kept their civil rights including the right of compensation for their property.

The Slavic population underwent marginalization and humiliation during Italian rule in Istria (1920–1943) which escalated in the second, fascist period.[10]

After it became clear in 1947 that most of Istria would become part of Yugoslavia (now Croatia and Slovenia), many Italian Istrians opted for Italian citizenship, which meant that they were ordered to leave Yugoslavia within a year. In the next decade, the majority of Italian Istrians, once the upper layer of Istrian society, left villages, small towns, and the city of Pula. Istrian Italian author Claudio Ugussi, in his novel *La Città Divisa* [The Divided City], describes the attitude towards Slavs in an Italian Istrian family in Pula immediately after the war and before leaving for Italy:

> However, more than the former sincere laughter, I noticed, and later became aware of it, that there was a murderous irony that surpassed everything else, to become sarcasm, sometimes even cruel, and not only towards the liberators, whom many already considered boring, but also sarcasm toward themselves and their own circumstances. […] And that hostility and intolerance toward everything that came from the Slavic world had triggers that did not emerge by chance in recent years. And yet, I got to know that Slavic world, at least partly, those months when I was sheltered in safety and I could never forget the hospitality of aunt Tonka's family, their simplicity, the connection of their daily life and their deep faith. They had been there for centuries living on the red soil they belonged to and without which they would not have been able to survive; we lived in our cities for who knows how long, we spoke a different language, had a different culture and we almost didn't know they existed or didn't want to know, paying attention to them only when we wanted to laugh behind their backs. (Ugussi 2002: 95)

The city of Pula was seething with conflicts.

> Unfortunately, that's how the first conflicts began. Words quickly turned into actions. Groups were formed on both sides, which roamed the city evening and night, armed with iron fists and rods, to settle old scores and to find any reason to create new ones. And if someone expressed oneself in some way in politics, agreeing with one political option, they could not walk alone after sunset. (Ugussi 2002: 124)

The choice whether to stay or to go, as Ugussi describes further, was sometimes instinctive and not quite rational. Some members of a family would decide to stay and some to leave, dividing the family not only physically.

> How many families will be divided in this game of feelings… Sons opposed fathers, brothers, sisters, wives, husbands. Who knows what decision my father would have made if he were alive; he who despised all forms of arrogance and believed in the independence of the working class and in a fairer society. (Ugussi 2002: 178)

[10] As early as 1923, the use of Croatian and Slovenian in Istria was banned in official communication, and schools and other institutions that based their activities on Slavic identity and culture were closed. Toponyms as well as people's names were Italianized. In the later phase of Italian rule and the escalation of fascist ideology, the marginalization, humiliation and oppression of Croats and Slovenes reached dramatic proportions. The consequences of the oppression and crimes committed have never been made sufficiently publicized in Italian public memory, and were frequently forgotten or suppressed, especially when interpreting the "Exodus" in a broader framework, in the context of cause-and-effect relationships.

The quotes by Claudio Ugussi's novel are mentioned because he was one of the few authors able to describe the situation in Pula from various viewpoints. Other literature – mostly novels and biographies – on the Istrian "Exodus" is both plentiful and very important in framing and reframing emigrant experiences.[11]

When leaving, many city dwellers took everything that could be taken, and some things that should not have been. They even knocked out the door and window frames of houses, hoping to build "another Pula in Italy". For months in 1947 the ship "Toscana" sailed between Pula and Venice, and the life substance of the city of Pula was slowly but steadily drained. According to some sources, the ship transported 13,056 persons to Italy, while other sources put the number at 16,800. Emigrants could not build a new Pula anywhere, not even a small village, because they were displaced all over Italy in refugee camps, often former barracks. Entire families were crammed into small spaces, sometimes divided from their neighbors only by blankets. The emigration process, sometimes legal, sometimes illegal (for those who did not opt for Italian citizenship and/or could not obtain the necessary documents and a passport, but wanted to leave Yugoslavia) continued until the mid-1950s.

Post-war Italy did not welcome them with open arms. Moreover, the "*Esuli*" reminded them of the past they wanted to forget. They were also their competition in finding the few paying jobs available.[12] In Istria, those who stayed were called the "*Rimasti*". The reasons for staying were different: old, sick parents who were not able to travel and who needed care, a deep-rooted emotional attitude toward the land, and several other compelling reasons. The "*Rimasti*" themselves faced many difficulties. Suddenly the lively space of the town or village where they lived was almost deserted or populated by new people speaking a different language. They were often regarded with suspicion, and their reasons for staying were questioned.

STAYING IN ISTRIA

After the majority of Istrian Italians left, the remaining ones – the "*Rimasti*" – were regarded as an "autochthonous minority" in Yugoslavia. The process of turning the Italian population into a national minority was over. According to the latest census from 2021 there are

[11] On a more general level, it might be useful to reflect here on the text by Odete Heynders, who sees novels as an important form of social knowledge about refugees and migrants. She deals with migration in the context of Europe, building a very strong case for the importance of literature (and the study thereof) in the context of migration and the complex configuration of victims, survivors and law keepers that comes with it. She analyzes the knowledge on migrant experiences that is provided by these novels, and how this knowledge contributes to the societal reframing of migrants. Furthermore, she presents literature as a sort of hermeneutic warning system producing social knowledge that allows readers to develop interpretations and imaginations which differ significantly from other sources (Heynders 2019).

[12] A concise overview of the situation is offered in Enrico Miletto's text on the inclusion of "*Esuli*" in Italy (Miletto 2009).

13,763 Italians living in Croatia, three quarters of whom live in Istria. They comprise 5% of the overall population of Istria. They have the right to use the Italian language and flag in many municipalities and cities, as well as on the county level. The County of Istria officially adopted Croatian/Italian bilingualism, including the everyday use of bilingual signs and texts in the bilingual areas. As one of the autochthonous national minorities, Italians also elect a minority parliamentary representative. In addition to educational institutions and libraries in Istria, there is an Italian high school in Rijeka, and an Italian kindergarten in Zadar. *La Voce del Popolo* [Voice of the People] is published in Rijeka in Italian for members of the national minority. The visibility of the public and social life of Italians in Istria and the neighboring areas has for decades been communicated through *Unione Italiana* [Italian Union], founded – with a slightly different agenda – in 1944 in Čemparovica near Labin. The Union is spread throughout numerous *Comunità degli Italiani* [Italian communities]. Information is published on their web pages which claims that they have 31,922 major members of the Italian union, of whom 3,254 are in Slovenia and 28,668 are in Croatia. The *Unione Italiana*, founded in Rovinj in 1968, hosts the Centre for Historic Research [*Centro di ricerche storiche di Rovigno*], which is very active in research and publishing local history and culture.

LOUD AND SILENT VOICES

In Italy, after many months and years spent creating the foundations for a new life, Istrian Italians established many associations named after the location where they had previously lived, with the prefix "Family", such as Famiglia Montonese (originating from Motovun), Famiglia Pisinota (Pazin) and many others. Many of them have been publishing regular magazines and, more recently, web pages. The number of published memoirs on life in Istria and the trauma of leaving it is huge. The Regional Institute for the Istrian-Fiuman-Dalmatian Culture in Trieste [Istituto Regionale per la Cultura Istriano-Fiumano-Dalmata] has been particularly active. Besides library and archive, research and publishing activity, they initiated a Civic Museum of Istrian Fiuman and Dalmatian civilization [*Civico Museo della Civiltà Istriana Fiumana e Dalmata*] in Trieste, which opened in June 2015. The leading idea was:

> ISTRIANS, FIUMANS, DALMATIANS: a great people who, over the centuries, have shown that they are also A GREAT PEOPLE. Winning in every field: in science, art, work. And in thought. Defeated only by the events of history which uprooted their roots and dispersed their fruits with a massive exodus after the end of the Second World War. But those scattered fruits created seeds and these germinated in every part of the world. Recovering, conserving, studying and developing every cultural trait of these people of ours is the task of the I.R.C.I., the Istrian-Fiuman-Dalmatian Regional Institute for Culture of Trieste. And this is our new website, a communication and meeting place for all those who care about our history and our people.[13]

[13] From the I.R.C.I. web page (http://www.irci.it/irci/index.php/it/ (accessed 15 December 2022)).

Part of their collections originates from "Warehouse 18" (Magazzino 18), where one can still visit and see a huge amount of furniture, pictures and photographs, together with many house utensils. The "*Esuli*" took all of these objects with them, but they were not able to take them to refugee camps or sometimes even to their new homes. Only a few of them returned and collected their property, but many simply left it in Trieste.

However, the content of "Magazzino 18" will soon be transferred to another warehouse in the Old Port of Trieste, Magazzino 26, where a new museum space will be created, together with museum objects and material from the – now closed – Civic Museum of Istrian, Fiuman and Dalmatian Civilization.[14] In the spring of 2023, it will still be possible to visit Magazzino 18, but only as participants in guided tours.

Unfortunately, no collaboration has ever been established between the institutions mentioned and their Croatian equivalents, such as the Ethnographic Museum of Istria. This fact should be understood in the context of the reevaluation of the "Exodus" through the lens of Italian politics starting at the end of the 20th century. This process was codified by a new law, according to which, in March of 2004, the Republic of Italy proclaimed February 10 to be the National Memorial Day of Exiles and Foibe, the Day of Remembrance [Giorno del ricordo] for short. The aim of the law was to preserve, safeguard and restore the memory of the "Exodus" and of the victims who died from being thrown into "foibe". The decision was followed by commemorations on February 10 in many Italian towns (held ever since the law was enacted), public speeches, projects, a theatre play, educational packages for schools[15] and movies. The TV movie *The Heart in the Pitt* [Il Cuore nel Pozzo] was watched by a television audience of millions. The movie, like many other productions within this context, was extremely one-sided, painting the main topic of the "Exodus" as black and white, even relating it and the "foibe" killings to the Holocaust. It justified the nationalistic narrative based on the opposition between the uncivilized, violent Slavs/partisans versus the civilized/innocent Italian civilians.

Among the many authors who wrote about this and other state-sponsored projects and their outcomes (also backed by the Civic Museum of Istrian, Fiuman and Dalmatian Civilization) are Roberta Altin and Natka Badurina who concluded:

> This is how the memory of the "Istrian exodus" played a key role in the construction of the identity not only of former migrants and their descendants, but also of many other Italian citizens of that border area. This identity is based on the trauma of a lost homeland, on a deep caesura in the lives of refugees, on the idealization of life before it, and on the idea of themselves as unrecognized victims of history. (2017: 318)

[14] Roberta Altin and Natka Badurina analyzed the context within which the collection was organized and assembled and wrote an excellent interpretation of the exhibited collections and the exhibition concept (Altin and Badurina 2017: 325–330).

[15] For more on educational and scientific projects and their outcomes see Vanni D'Alessio's text on recent Italian historiography (D'Alessio 2012a).

Various forms of commemorations of the "Exodus" and of the victims of "Foibe" were analyzed by several researchers in the 2010s and 2020s, such as Federico Tenca Montini (2014, 2016, 2019), Vanni D'Alessio (2012b), Mila Orlić (2012, 2015), Tullia Catalan (2021) and Eric Gobetti (2021).

Some institutions involved in the emigration of Italians from Istria demonstrated a preference for right-wing politics even long before the mentioned law was introduced, which was the reason why the Yugoslavian and later Croatian authorities (and the Yugoslavian/Croatian public) criticized them for decades for their black-and-white interpretation of history (and sometimes even territorial aspirations). Indeed, several Italian politicians have referred to Istria as a lost Italian territory, including the new Italian Prime Minister Meloni. She once mentioned the need for Istria and Dalmatia to return to Italy. Pamela Ballinger, the author of one of the most relevant books on the Istrian exile, wrote:

> […] the discourse of the Istrian exiles revolves around a sense of having been politically exploited and subsequently forgotten… Different exile associations have found patrons within Italian political parties, both those in power and those in opposition. Furthermore, contemporary exile narratives dating from the period of Italian unification until the First World War (the term irredentism derives from the struggle for an Italian state and the desire to redeem the unredeemed lands, the irredenta. (2003: 9)

Although some statements may seem shocking, most politicians in Croatia in recent decades did not strongly protest against them. It will be interesting to observe how rhetoric about "the lost Italian territory" will be handled in the coming years.

Some "*Esuli*" regularly visit Istria. Some have managed to keep their former family homes; some have secured accommodation for themselves and therefore spend several weeks or months in Istria. Others visit their family individually, whereas some take advantage of group travel organized by emigrant associations. Various commemorations, pilgrimages or visits to memorial sites are usually part of the program in these cases. This concept of visiting Istria reflects the collective remembrance that has become permanently tied down to particular sites or monuments. For instance, the sites most frequently visited in Pazin include the graveyard and the Čiže pit on the way from Pazin to Motovun. Close to the memorial place, twenty young people were murdered and thrown into a karst pit, in revenge for their supposed fascist past or connections. Since many older people who remember their childhood and youth in Istria have died, and the feeling of anger towards the people and contexts linked to the committed crimes has grown slightly weaker than twenty years ago, this ritual is slowly diminishing. As Ann Rigney wrote:

> Although it has proven useful as a conceptual tool, the metaphor of "memory site" can become misleading if it is interpreted to mean that collective remembrance becomes permanently tied down to particular figures, icons, or monuments. As the performative aspect of the term "remembrance" suggests, collective memory is constantly "in the works" and, like a swimmer, has to keep moving even just to stay afloat. To bring remembrance to a conclusion is de facto already to forget. While putting down

> a monument may seem like a way of ensuring long-term memory, it may in fact turn out to mark the beginning of amnesia unless the monument in question is continuously invested with new meaning (Koselleck). In light of these considerations, it seems inevitable that attention should have turned in recent years from memory sites as such to the cultural dynamics in which they function. (2008: 245)

Cultural dynamics linked to the ways in which events are commemorated and to the relative importance of certain sites and monuments at particular periods is also the result of current events in the political and broader social sphere. Overall, this cultural dynamics is contextualized in victimhood, increasingly becoming the subject of recent cultural studies. These studies, several of which were published in the *Cultural Practices of Victimhood* reader (Hoondert et al. 2019a), attempt to shed light on the ways in which victimhood is culturally constructed and practiced.

> From the very outset we turned away from the narrowness of positivist victimological definitions of victims as individualistic, passive and static. Rather, we took our inspiration from ideas that circulate within cultural victimology: "Being or becoming a victim is not a neat or absolute journey. Acquiring the status of victim involves being party to a range of interactions and processes, including identification, labelling and recognition" […] "In times of rugged and unapologetic individualism and shattered communities, suffering and mourning are social acts that bring people together and assist them in (re)building communities, societies, publics and nations" […] Victims have agency, they often have a political will and they actively give meaning to victimhood through various practices. Whether they do so as sovereigns, subalterns, or something in between has to be investigated on a case-to-case basis. (Hoondert et al. 2019b: 3)

This sense and practice of victimhood relates to the narrative shared through "*Esuli*" associations, which is the context where collective memory is communicated. Therefore, group visits of the "*Esuli*" often have a different quality than individual visits to family, and especially long stays in one's own houses or apartments. The latter options are characteristic of areas where Istrian Italians predominated, such as Vodnjan, Bale and some other settlements in the southwestern part of Istria. In the summertime, the "*Esuli*" mix together with other residents and other "*Esuli*", creating a more "natural" atmosphere. In areas where Istrian Italians were not dominant, such as Pazin, their visits and interaction with the locals are of a much more ceremonial nature.

As a result of all this, a researcher studying the "Exodus" encounters strong voices originating from different social and political contexts and the media. It is not at all easy to look behind the established narratives and arrive at direct personal testimonies in the search of individual memory. Even personal statements from private conversations were interwoven with general phrases of previously formed narratives, which also dominated statements related to personal memory (Pontiggia 2009). Of course, collective and individual memory intertwine and interact with each other. However, the intention of the research conducted within the *Identity on the Line* project was to reach as many authentic voices as possible, especially those that had not been heard until recently. Another important objective was

to understand the legacy of the "Exodus", narratives present in Istria today, and how those narratives are remembered today among those who left, among those who stayed and, on a more universal level, by Istrians in general.

Even today, in terms of the physical environment, Istria bears witness to the departure of a part of the population. Many smaller towns in the hinterland still contain half-ruined houses that, given unresolved property issues, no one is repairing. This contributes to the phrase which is often used in tourism about "Dreamy Istria" or "Magical, mysterious Istria", which, in effect, relies on the fact that abandoned houses, parts of settlements, and ruins may seem romantic to a modern visitor.

Those Istrian Italians who stayed – the "*Rimasti*" – actually offered the most surprising stories and information in the course of the research; these are the people whose voices have rarely been heard. True, in their books, both Pamela Ballinger (Ballinger 2003) and – more recently – Katja Hrobat Virloget (Hrobat Virloget 2021), as the representatives of the most relevant recent anthropological scholarship dealing with the "Exodus",[16] devoted chapters to the "*Rimasti"*, but their stories, their experiences have not been heard in Croatian Istria. Unione Italiana cared about their social and cultural life, but subtler content of their destinies has not been communicated.

STORIES OF THE "RIMASTI"

Istrian Italians were interviewed for the I-ON project during 2020 and some of 2021. This was a time of the lockdown and difficulties in direct communication due to the measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was somewhat easier to contact the inhabitants of Istria, while direct communication with the Istrians in Italy was barely possible. Given that Istrian Italians are bilingual, it was not crucial in my communication with them I did not speak the dialect of their locality, which might have been significant when communicating with the "*Esuli*".[17]

The interviews were based on several pre-prepared questions that were asked of all the interviewees. Referring to the reasons for leaving Istria and the life immediately after World War II, an old lady said the following:

> Eh, the reasons… there were so many reasons for esodo because, first of all, people suddenly couldn't adapt to the way of life because in the beginning it wasn't nice, neither

[16] Another relevant anthropological approach is offered in texts by the Italian anthropologist Stefano Pontiggia (Pontiggia 2009, 2013).

[17] My knowledge of Italian was acquired at language courses and differs to a great extent from the Istrian-Venetian dialect used by Istrian Italians today. In addition, each place also has its own speech. This is why my Italian always sounds artificial. Surprisingly, an acquaintance who is from the south of Italy told me that sometimes in Istria he preferred to use English in contact with the local Italians, because his southern Italian speech caused even greater misunderstandings than if he used English.

> for those of us who stayed nor for those who left, it was difficult. Those who wanted, left; they couldn't stay because there used to be a lot of rich people here and at that time people were forced to go to cooperatives, and rich people as well had to bring all the property they had there: so, these people didn't stay here, they saw that there was no life for them here, and left. The richer ones left at first, but also a lot of poor people, because later, I don't know what year, they started firing Italians and the people who lost their jobs – they all left… and thought they would find paradise. Instead, they found – you could say hell – because you know how they lived in refugee camps, all of them in one big room, separated with blankets… We couldn't see how they lived afterwards, because when they came back here to visit us, when the authorities permitted them to visit Istria, then they talked about that, but I didn't really listen to them because I was still a girl then, and I wasn't very interested. When they wanted to come back here, they were supposed to get permission; some were rejected, not all of them were let in, it was very difficult. If they found some small thing that was not in their favor, like if when they were here they spoke badly about our country or something like that, they wouldn't be able to come back. Interestingly, the richest people never returned. They weren't even allowed by the authorities to come here, they didn't give them permission to come because they said they were fascists…well, they were all, the majority of these rich people, those who left, belonged to the fascist party. When the first ones started coming, they talked about how their life there was bad too… and we remained, poor and miserable, we stayed… but at least we were in our houses… It was very difficult for us because we only knew how to speak Italian, we didn't know Croatian and everyone looked at us with disdain. They always mistreated us for our language, we were punished for being Italian, although we are indigenous people here. We went to shops to buy something and we couldn't ask in Croatian because we didn't know how… Here in the village, they spoke Italian; here the shop assistants didn't know Croatian, these ones who worked here with us. The problems occurred when we went to the city (Pula) to shop, to buy ourselves something, because there was nothing here… I remember that my mom went all the way to Pazin to buy me a coat and she bought me a blanket… I asked her why she bought me a blanket… (Maria C., born in 1936, Galižana/Gallesano, August 2020)

Members of the younger generation, born after 1960, answered my questions about the "Exodus". "Esodo again? Do we have to keep coming back to it? There are so many other topics important for our life today! Enough of identifying us with the theme of exodus!" (Sara P., born in 1971, Umag/Umago, February 2021). However, more of them agreed to talk. The older ones explained to me that the years after most of the Istrian Italians left were very sad. The once lively streets and squares were replaced by desolation. The children no longer had anyone to play with, their best friends disappeared overnight, and the new children, if there were any, spoke a foreign language. There was hardly anyone in the church. Everything suddenly changed. They lost their homeland without ever physically moving. What affected them deeply was the suspicion and even humiliation by the new authorities. On the other hand, they were also suspected by the "*Esuli*". There are two reasons for this. Firstly, by staying in Istria, they proved that not all Italians were literally forced to leave; that is, that it was not necessarily ethnic cleansing, as claimed by some *"Esuli"* circles. Secondly, the following questions about them were hanging over "*Esulis*"

head: Why did they stay? Did they have some connections with the new government, or did they gain some privileges? Thus, leading a life in a completely changed environment, they suffered suspicion from both relevant circles. Later, when the "*Esuli*" started visiting their old homeland, they were often not satisfied with how the heritage of the place or city was interpreted or how some places had changed. Petrifying their memories (as is often the case with emigrants), they expected to find their old neighborhoods as they had been when they left them.

> It irritates me when some of the esuli can't get out of that story of theirs. It became part of their identities. I know a woman who spoke publicly about the trauma of illegal border crossings on the way to Italy. Each time, her story becomes more dramatic. As if we didn't even exist… we only talk about them, even now when there is a party… it is always the Esuli… and what are we? We find ourselves a little offended by this thing… because we too lived badly. From the beginning, they came nicely dressed, with new cars or motorbikes and wanted to show to the rest of us that they made it. They were showing off and looking down on us… However, already in the 1960s, our standard also increased, it was almost like theirs, but we did not have to leave our birthplace and go through the ordeal in all those refugee camps. One of the members of my family who settled down in Turin would say: "Oh, so you bought a washing machine (or a car, for example)?" Many of them live in Turin and the sea is far from them. And I see the sea here every day. I think it wasn't easy for some who left to see that their pain might have been unnecessary. Some of them thought that here we became rich thanks to their land, thanks to the goods that they previously owned or used. Some of them received reimbursement for the real estate they owned, some did not receive anything. But now there is the a generation… now there are children's children and so it doesn't take much and you are connected by the memory of the town… And the kids are happy to come here, especially if their old family house wasn't sold. They modernized them and stay there occasionally. I think the younger generation of Italians here is no longer interested in it. Some people are already tired of those stories about the exodus – I guess everything has already been said and written about that. We have to move on. Nationality is no longer important to them – people of all colors are already walking around our city. Today, mostly everyone is an individualist. (Roberta R., born in 1958, Vodnjan/Dignano, September 2022)

STORIES OF THE "ESULI"

It is not easy for people outside the "*Esuli*" group to talk to them about the "Exodus", especially if they are of different origin and members of the out-group. During my research, I was fortunate that the local people, who worked in local cultural institutions or associations and who were also among the most active members of the local Italian community, agreed to connect me with informants. They selected them themselves; they knew them from earlier, and correctly concluded that they would be open to talking to me. They helped me immeasurably and I do not know how else I could have gotten in touch

with informants.[18] I had the opportunity to listen to "first-hand" experiences from various "Exodus" participants. I had already read a number of published memoirs, however personal contact with people who lived through it, told me about it and had a strong emotional reaction at the same time – this had a strong impact on me personally. These are issues that cannot be experienced only professionally, and the content of the narrations dominated my consciousness for some time.[19] In terms of content, stories about humiliations in Istria, experiences from refugee camps and bitter disappointments in the new settings were most common. What was new were testimonies about returning from Italy after an unsuccessful attempt to create a new life and existence in Turin, and a couple of those that illustrate women's position in the process of leaving Istria. The following story, told by a woman, is about illegal border crossing, which was fairly common when individuals could not get a passport:

> – Okay, let's take the bus, let's go to Umag, spend the day with Marino! – But in the evening a person arrived, I was exhausted on the sofa, very happy because I had played all day... A person arrived who came to pick us up and mum said: – Come on, let's go! – Oh, mom, you go, I'm tired. – Come, let's go! We left, we went and this gentleman took us to the heights, further on. I don't know where, in any case it was still in Umag, on these heights from which the fires of the Trieste refineries could be seen in the distance. I only learned three or four years ago from my uncle, my dad's brother, dad was already gone, that that guide tried to seduce my mom. She refused him (but I absolutely don't remember it, I was 7 years old). She refused; however, the result was that this guide left us there where we could see the fires of Trieste; he said goodbye, follow the fires. We walked for four hours in the night listening to the sound of barking dogs. We were walking up the hills, my mum was all ragged at one point. I was usually a tomboy, for me it was fun, but she, poor thing, climbed up, fell down. And then, with the fear of not knowing if it was the right direction, with the fear of hearing those dogs in the distance, at a certain point we arrived behind a house lit by the moon – there was only that house in the countryside, and we saw the moon cast the shadow of a person in front of the house. And then my mom said – We should walk in that direction but we can't, if they see us, we are finished. We went all the way around, we managed to climb through – I don't know where we managed to cross to the other side. (Maria Grazia B. born in 1956, Vodnjan/Dignano, August 2020)

Many collected stories testified to the humiliations that Istrian Italians experienced at work, in schools, in the public life in general. I personally have not been told the most tragic and horrible stories about murders and throwing people into pits ("*foibe*"), which are certainly the darkest part of the tragic post-war history of Istria. However, each story of those who

[18] I am especially grateful to Sandro Manzin and Pietro Demori.

[19] The project *Identity on the Line* has been going on for 4 years (at the time of writing this text, it has already been three and a half years), during which time the realities of the lives of both emigrants and the remaining Italians in Istria followed me as a researcher all this time. It is quite a burden that I was not ready to bear at the beginning, and the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's attack on Ukraine were happening in parallel – as the ultimate proof that situations that result in displacement of people keep occurring again and again.

left is moving in its own way and everyone's life changed dramatically under those circumstances. The following testimony concerns a boy who decided to leave because of his teacher lacking understanding and support:

> This was in 1964, the penultimate year of school. The Croatian teacher told me that I wouldn't pass because I didn't speak Croatian well… – Eh, but – I said – I've done all the classes so far in Italian schools – and she said – Then go to the other side –and she waved like this… Everyone knew she was a bad teacher, a nationalist… She was not from Istria at all, but somewhere from eastern Yugoslavia… (Egidio C. born in 1948, Vodnjan/Dignano, August 2020)

Istrian Italians, proud and self-conscious in their homeland were not prepared to be treated as primitive and dangerous people in Italy. An old man told me:

> Ah well, the whole family stayed in Trieste, at the Silos, for several days, we slept on the floor, right on the floor, without blankets, nothing; like animals […] and you can imagine the pain of my mother, my father […] I was young, yes, but I understood something, at 13 you can understand something, but I believe I did not experience the pain like my parents of having to leave home, property, countryside, animals… In Tortona my brother and I were sharing the same bench at school and there were those stalls with an inkwell. The teacher said: – Now I want to check your knowledge of Italian. She gave us a sheet of paper, one to me, one to my brother (of course, the others had a notebook to write in and we didn't) […] And during the next lesson, it was a woman, she came to give us lessons and lifted our sheets of papers, one mine and one my brother's, got up from her desk, showed the papers to everyone, and then she said: – You see, these refugees have written on these two sheets, it shows that they were born in a stable… Then I couldn't take it anymore, I took the inkwell, I threw it after her – I had an instinctive act that I never thought I would be able to do… But she was sent away from teaching… Imagine how she treated two little refugees who had their own dramatic story… and in Calambrone, Tirrenia, the Italians were telling their children – be good because otherwise I'll make you eat by the refugees – here you can understand how difficult it was for our parents, seeing us treated in this way… what could we do… nothing… (Luigi D., born in 1935, Vodnjan/Dignano, August 2020)

What all the informants shared was the satisfaction that their story would reach beyond Italy and Croatia and that it may serve to raise awareness, preventing something like this from happening again. It was also important for some that their trauma would be presented in the context of similar traumas that happened in European countries at a similar time, but it seems that was scant consolation for the majority.

As much as I am aware of the different situations and (social and political) circumstances of those Istrians who left and those who stayed, a detailed analysis of their different realities are far beyond the scope of this article. Many authors listed in the bibliography have been very successful in that regard. In this case I have selected extracts from interviews that illustrate the predominant quality and characteristics of the recent memory of the "Exodus". I am also familiar with the "*Esuli*" narrative and its characteristic topoi both from

published texts (individual testimonies as well as their analyses and interpretations by anthropologists and historians) and my previous research. However, endeavoring to present the communicated stories[20] as a part of today's legacy of the "Exodus" and the difficult heritage related to it, I have not featured their analyses from that point of view. Rather, my approach has been based on the ethnography of remembering the "Exodus" today as a result of the recent interviews.

TESTIMONIES TRANSLATED INTO EXHIBITIONS

The idea to translate and "exhibit" stories both by exiled Istrians and those who stayed appeared to be a daunting task at first. How should one exhibit texts and make them communicate dynamically with the audience? How can one make them sufficiently "eye catching" so that visitors would understand and value the very sensitive and intimate content? All informants were asked to sign permissions for their stories to be published in the project in different forms and media formats. Nonetheless, making their most personal quotations and photos highly visible might result in something that could be the very opposite of what we wanted to achieve.

The first test came with designing and assembling the joint exhibition – the exhibition featuring materials from all partners in the project. For months, discussions were held to determine how to stage the exhibition, finding common themes that were relevant for all partners in the projects and the migratory processes they had been working on. Finally, several themes organized as polarities were identified, and these were: Home and Away, Belonging and Alienation, Resilience and Vulnerability, Silence and Openness, Injustice and Reconciliation. Most of the material, based on the interviews and photos from the seven countries, was sorted and presented under those headings. The selected quotations were illustrated by photographs of informants or by the objects or places mentioned in their quotations. The second part of the exhibition was based on historiographic data from each country (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Lithuania, Slovenia, Croatia) concerning the period and the phenomenon interpreted. Expectedly, the researchers had a central role in designing the exhibition. It was decided at an early stage that the exhibition would be intended for an outdoor, public space, so that it would reach a non-standard museum audience. The modern construction that carried panels with texts and photos was very inviting and attracted many people near the museums or in busy parts of the cities which were home to the project partners. In Pazin, Istria (as well as in the other cities), one of the target groups was high school students who attended and participated in focus groups. The exhibition in Ljubljana opened in front of the Museum of Recent History in January

[20] Another point that should be kept in mind when reading the stories of the "*Esuli*" in this text is the fact that all of interviewees were interviewed in Istria, in Croatia, which they have been visiting for years on a regular basis and interacting with the local population. That might have influenced the content of their testimonies to a certain degree.

2022. Then it was exhibited in front of the Ethnographic Museum in Pazin, and later, in turn, in all of the cities and towns of the project partners. Subsequently, it started traveling to other destinations, initially Graz, Austria.

Each museum-partner also worked on their own exhibition related to a local theme. In this way, the Ethnographic Museum of Istria in Pazin opened an exhibition in April 2022 titled *Connections – Legami – Istrians after the Second World War.* It was entirely dedicated to the heritage of Istrian Italians, to those who left, those who stayed, and their relationship. The exhibition consisted of a series of panels cut in the shape of human figures, each bearing the testimony and photographs of an interviewee. The photos also illustrated objects important to the informants, scenes from certain places and other motifs related to the people depicted. All but one person, who passed away just before the opening of the exhibition, are still alive. One side of each panel contained text in Croatian, and the other, in Italian. Arranged randomly near each other, the panels forced people to circulate among them to achieve the impression of intermingling with people and their destinies. Their testimonies could be heard through the headphones. The introductory panels explained the "Exodus" of Istrian Italians. The text was written by a researcher from the Center for Historical Research in Rovinj, an institution operating under the umbrella of the Italian Union. The exhibition contained only several three-dimensional objects, but those that were on display sent a strong message. For example, one object was a metal box and its contents, found during the renovation of an old house in Pula. The house was a former inn whose owners emigrated to Italy. They could not be traced and had no descendants. Before leaving, they hid valuables in the wall of their house: money and gold (jewelry and watches). They probably intended to return, however they obviously had not, and the box remained walled up and forgotten. The Ethnographic Museum bought the box and its contents in 2019 and included it in the exhibition. By presenting these objects we endeavored to tell a touching story about the departures, after which Istria was forever crucially changed.

The first joint exhibition included several quotes from interviews with Istrians, but they were a part of a thematic section and therefore less visible. In the framework of the *Connections – Legami* exhibition, however, quotes from interviews were the main content of about twenty-one individual panels which, in their anthropomorphic form, reflected the gender of the informants, and contained private, family information on each of them. Although the information and content that were intended to be publicly visible were agreed upon in advance, the question remained how they would react when they saw their fates exposed in this way. Unfortunately, not all informants were able to see the exhibition, especially those who live in Italy (although its web version and printed exhibition catalogue were also published), but those who saw it did not share any negative reactions with us. Moreover, they took photographs and posed for photos with the panels (approximately the height of men and women) that included texts about them, their quotes and photos. It seemed as if the exhibition signified an event of almost momentous value for the segment of their past related to emigration.

Given that a relationship of trust was established during cooperation with the informants, it was important to convey their statements and the material they shared with us in a way that would not cause them discomfort or embarrassment. It appears that we[21] did not disappoint them – allaying the fear expressed by Katja Hrobat Virloget in her book *In the Silence of Memory: "Exodus" and Istria* (Hrobat Virloget 2021: 253). The press and the other media, including television, reported on the opening at length. The opening was attended by representatives of various associations – "Communities" of Italians in Istria. The exhibition itself was opened by the President of the Italian Union, Maurizio Tremul.

What seems noteworthy in this case (as well as the local exhibitions of other partners in their museums) is the communication potential of exhibitions as a medium that reaches a larger audience in a more direct way than simply texts in which the results of anthropological research are published. Exhibitions also encourage accompanying smaller projects; such as in our case, working with students. Another advantage of exhibitions as a means of disseminating the results of anthropological research is the opportunity they create for direct and ample feedback from various holders of difficult heritage to attendees who are faced with the topic for the first time. In a city such as Pazin, an exhibition on this topic can certainly cause some discomfort, considering the history of public awareness of it. However, many museums, especially regional ones, which reach out more directly to the communities in which they operate, have recently engaged in tackling the so-called "difficult heritage" as also stated in most recent texts about local museums and this kind of heritage:

> Community museums can be contested sites for learning as they often communicate clear, subjective narratives that challenge mainstream ideas of the past by introducing knowledge that they know to be uncomfortable […]. Many of them result from grassroots efforts with a purpose of emphasizing the history of a specific location, a particular group or community, or specific events that, in the opinion of their founders, are not covered satisfactorily through other mediums. As a consequence, community museums aim to foster not only awareness but also sympathy for the cause displayed and, as such, are interested in a social and political process. (Weiglhofer et al. 2023: 3)

Nevertheless, despite the undeniable relevance of an approach that places museums at the center of social dialogue and even enables museums to become a place of communication (and perhaps also healing) of trauma, it is necessary, viewed more broadly, to face the risks of such an approach. A key question is whether museums are equipped to deal with the after effects, such as triggering recollections of past traumas in its visitors (Thomas 2021: 543) and other consequences related to "difficult heritage". On a broader, European level, especially when comparing different "difficult heritages", another challenge linked to the "hierarchy of memory" might occur as pointed out in the text of Susannah Eckersley and Gönül Bozoğlu:

[21] Lidija Nikočević and Tamara Nikolić Đerić were the authors of the exhibition.

> The paradox which resides within this attempt at multidirectionality is twofold. Firstly, it may be seen as offering enrichment to Europe through a plurality of memory – in other words, by seeing more events as steps or milestones along a path of progress towards defining a new European democracy. Secondly, it may be considered as highlighting a struggle over a perceived hierarchy of memory, articulated along various battle lines. For example, geographic distinctions between East and West, between left-wing and right-wing, or between revisionist and progressive. […] The mythologizing and instrumentalization of selective memories by different European nations – in different ways at different times – can be seen critically as a form of strategic memory use on the part of political actors. Particular narratives emerge from such selective approaches to the past, which are directed to fit a contemporary political, social or cultural purpose. (Eckersley and Bozoğlu 2019: 168)

With all of this in mind, I can conclude by saying that the exhibitions realized under the umbrella of the *Identity on the Line* project gave voice to stories that were, in most cases, rarely heard, especially within the museum context and above all, interconnected to one another within the framework of the project. We believe that the Istrian component of the project, which focused on the heritage of the unwilling population transfer of Istrian Italians, and which was based on recent, first-hand testimonials, was a valuable contribution in this respect.

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GLASOVI KOJI SE (PONOVNO) ČUJU: ISTARSKI TALIJANI U ISTRI I IZVAN NJE

Iseljavanje, odnosno egzodus istarskih Talijana u razdoblju nakon Drugog svjetskog rata dosad je često bio predmetom istraživanja mnogih povjesničara i antropologa. Ta je tema ponovo aktualizirana zahvaljujući EU projektu *Identity on the Line* u okviru kojeg je istraživan i interpretiran niz nedobrovoljnih migracija i njihovih neželjenih posljedica za određene narode, zajednice i pojedince u Europi sredinom 20. stoljeća. U istraživanju istarskog egzodusa nastojalo se doći do novih iskaza, doprijeti do glasova koji se dosad nisu čuli. U tom procesu došli su do izražaja i kompleksni status i sudbina istarskih Talijana koji nisu iselili, tzv. rimasta, čiji je suodnos s iseljenim istarskim Talijanima (esulima) kao i s novonastalom društvenom okolinom bio izuzetno složen, a ujedno predstavlja i najmanje istražen aspekt ovog fenomena. Fotografije i iskazi jednih i drugih trebali su u konačnici poslužiti kao građa predstavljena u dvjema izložbama, filmovima i publikacijama i time izložiti intimne sadržaje (od kojih su neki prvi put izrečeni) javnom prostoru. Takvo je prevođenje svakako podrazumijevalo vrlo opreznu i osjetljivu suradnju s informatorima, s ciljem da njihove traume postanu vidljivije, a tako i muzeji kao institucije u kojima se sve više nastoji komunicirati i tzv. teška baština.

Ključne riječi: neželjene migracije, traumatična prošlost, teška baština, istarski egzodus, muzeji