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## **Divided memories. Istrian exodus in the urban space of Trieste<sup>1</sup>**

The “Istrian exodus”, a migration of about 250,000 people from Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia to Italy (mainly to Trieste) after the Second World War, has been remembered in different ways at different times since then. Until the 1990s the memories existed mostly in the minds of the exiles and in local historiographical and popular publications but then they became national, a ubiquitous theme at the highest level. This article analyses the current state of these memories by examining some sites and cultural events in Trieste, in order to understand both the process of heritage and identity construction of the exile community and the reasons why a shared memory did not develop in this border area.

**Keywords:** Istrian exodus, Trieste, sites of memory, border area

This paper is about the memory of the migration movement of around 250,000 people from the Istria peninsula to Italy after the Second World War. Since most of the migrants were Italians, and since they abandoned the regions – the peninsula, the city of Fiume and parts of Dalmatia – that had belonged to Italy between the two wars and were now incorporated into the new socialist Yugoslavia, the event can be considered within the large European phenomenon of migrations aimed at “ethnic simplification” within the new post-war borders, sometimes planned and sometimes reluctantly tolerated by the new governments.<sup>1</sup> The memory of these migrations, often at odds with the official national historical narratives and with the post-war political balance, has long been ignored by historical research.<sup>2</sup> The “crisis of Trieste”, a local extension of the Second World War solved only in 1954 (and definitively not until 1975), was considered an exemplum of the successful operation of diplomacy for peace.<sup>3</sup> The “history from below” and the exiles’ memory were left to popular publications and limited to the exiles’ circles until the eighties. In the last thirty years, however, a remarkable amount of various kinds of commemorative material has been produced: publications, monuments, rituals and celebrations, a memorial day, a museum, a theatrical performance. These

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elaborations of memory played a fundamental role in the identity construction not only of the erstwhile migrants, but also of many other Italian citizens of this border area. Their identity is based on the trauma of the lost homeland, on the deep chasm in their lives, on the idealization of their life before it and on their self-perception as the unrecognised victims of history.

Following Malkki's warning against the generalisation of the refugee as a victim above politics and history (a generalisation that ultimately dehumanises the refugees' environment),<sup>4</sup> our aim will be to consider the memory of the Istrian exodus as a set of memory sites in which historiography, public history, politics and collective memory are interwoven and mutually influenced. Our approach refers to studies on memory and on the process of heritage and identity construction in an interethnic context<sup>5</sup>. We try to analyse how collective remembering works in the local commemorative life of displaced people. We do not aim to reconstruct historical facts, nor try to reinterpret complicated and conflicting political history. Our focus is on the memory and the contemporary identity politics of the Istrian exiles – understood as part of the wider European phenomena of “memory mania”, musealisation and the nostalgia and heritage industries, well described by Sharon Macdonald in *Memorylands*.<sup>6</sup> The clear links with our contemporary world, especially topics such as forced migration and resettlement, will, it is anticipated, be tackled in future work.

### **Some notes about the historical context**

Until 1918 the areas of Trieste, Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia were in the Austrian Empire, their population consisting mainly of Italians, Croats and Slovenes. Each ethnic group began, from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to claim their national rights. National élites were engaged in creating ethnocentric narratives, trying to determine strict borders between the communities based mainly on language and ignoring the multilingualism and the fluidity of local identities typical for border areas.<sup>7</sup> In these narratives the communities were described as perfectly homogeneous and deeply rooted in the territory. In order to prove their exclusive autochthony, each national narrative excluded the others and presented them as those who “came later”. On the Italian side, this narrative was built on the founding ideas of the *Risorgimento*, the Italian national movement, and gave birth to the political idea of *irredentismo*, which demanded the return – the annexation to the Italian homeland – of *unredeemed* national territories, Istria and Dalmatia among others, as a fulfillment of the process of political unification of the Italian state.

These areas (Trieste, Istria, Fiume and parts of Dalmatia) were occupied and then annexed to Italy at the end of the first World War, the change of borders causing the first significant migration movements in the area, in each direction. Italians living in the parts of Dalmatia annexed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (SHS) moved to Italy,<sup>8</sup> and the migrations of Slovenes and Croats from the regions annexed to Italy lasted right up to the Second World War and eventually

totalled around 100,000 people.<sup>9</sup> The migration of Slavic people from Italy to Yugoslavia was intensified after the accession of the fascist government, as a result of its repressive policy against the non-Italian population. During the Italian occupation of Yugoslav territory (1941–1943), the persecution worsened, including the establishment of concentration camps for Slovenes and Croats.<sup>10</sup>

The Yugoslav communist party was absolutely dominant in the antifascist resistance in these areas. It comprised not only Slovenes and Croats but also numerous Italians. In addition to its ideological and class aims, the antifascist movement also had the clear territorial ambition of the annexation of the Istrian area to the future socialist Yugoslavia. After the capitulation of Italy in 1943, Yugoslav armed forces took control of Istria for a brief period – about a month – before the Germans occupied it. In this period partisans committed acts of brutal and vindictive violence against the Italian population of the area, motivated by their collaboration, real or supposed, with the fascist regime. Best estimates suggest that about 700 people were killed, some of whom were then thrown into the karstic sinkholes, a geological phenomenon of this area and of the wider region: the local name for them is *foibe*. The term does not belong to standard Italian and so is easy to remember as specifically referring to the violence committed in this area and, subsequently, for the Italian population, as a powerful symbol of open graves and endless mourning.<sup>11</sup>

After liberation from the German occupation in 1945, the newly established Yugoslav government had a somewhat ambiguous attitude towards the Italian population in Istria; Italians were guaranteed minority rights, but there was a lingering, perceptible, suspicion of their being “enemies of the people”. These suspicions were heightened by new episodes of apparently inexplicable violence, for example the return of arbitrary killings and mass traumatic events such as the large number of deaths on the beach Vergarolla in the Istrian town Pola in the summer of 1946, when unexploded bombs from the war went off during a sports meeting of an Italian youth association. These events engendered an atmosphere of fear which would become one of the main reasons for Italians’ emigration. The number of victims of this semi-organised violence grew to between 2000 and 4000 people;<sup>12</sup> historians consider this process the transformation of the revolutionary communist Resistance into state violence.<sup>13</sup>

The partisans’ crimes have been symbolically represented by the *foibe* even though only a small proportion of victims’ bodies were thrown into the sinkholes.<sup>14</sup> Actually, the term had already been used in 1943 in the propaganda against Yugoslav antifascists promoted by the fascist Republic of Salò with the help of German occupiers. It is important to note that this use of the term has always implied a clear ethnic conflict between Italians and “Slavs”. This generic name for Slovenes, Croats and Serbs displayed the voluntary ignorance of the diversities between them and supported the incorrect interpretation of the conflict as only *ethnic*, transforming it into one that foreshadowed the extinction of the “Italianness” of the region. Eventually, it served as a hint of the global Russian communist threat, promoting the equation *Slav = communist / bolshevik = ferocious criminal*.<sup>15</sup>

The fear of *foibe* as presented in Italian anti-Yugoslav propaganda, the actual purges of political opponents carried out by the new Yugoslav government and its authoritarian stance were certainly among the main reasons for the Istrian Italians' migration. Other reasons might have been their rejection of the new class and national hierarchy (the sudden role reversal that offended the sense of superiority instilled in the Italian population throughout the period of fascist rule), mistrust of the socialist system, disagreement with the abolition of private property, unemployment, poverty and hope of a better future in the West. Between 1943 and 1956 almost whole Italian population of Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia moved to Italy in several migration waves related to the effects of war (the capitulation of Italy, the allied bombing of Zara) and to the various phases of the post-war diplomatic struggle over the border (the 1947 Paris Treaty of Peace, the London Memorandum in 1954). One third of the migrants remained at their first stop, Trieste, leaving visible traces in its demography, culture and urban space.

### The memory of the Istrian exodus

At the beginning, there was little interest in cultivating the memory of the exodus other than among the exiles themselves. In newspapers, and later in Italian historiography, the migration was given this resonantly biblical name, but the Cold War atmosphere neither permitted deeper political discussion, nor stimulated historiographical research on the topic. From the 1950s Yugoslavia ceased to be a threatening enemy and became a useful non-aligned state between the two blocks, an anti-Soviet ally, and was soon attractive as a commercial partner in the rapid economic development of the sixties. The migration movement seemed to have established a certain balance between the western and the eastern Adriatic coasts: there was the enhanced ethnic homogeneity of the both sides, and the properties left by migrants in Yugoslavia were used in diplomatic negotiations as a payment for the material and moral damage inflicted by the fascist occupation (with which the exiles were often identified), and this was not a pleasant remembrance for the Italian post-war state, built from the antifascist movements.

On the other hand, the properties the migrants could take with them – mostly modest household goods – were deposited in a big warehouse in Trieste, **warehouse** number 18 at the city's old harbour, waiting to be reclaimed by the owners when they settled into new homes. Almost nobody reclaimed anything, though, and the warehouse lay forgotten until the eighties. The abandoned warehouse and the relative absence of the topic from the public discourse at national level (apart from in right-wing politics) contributed to the feeling within the exile communities that their traumas were deeply buried, like the victims of the *foibe* and the hidden archaeological proofs of the “rootedness and autochthony of the Italian population of Istria” in Roman times. Pamela Ballinger defined this memory model as the “politics of submersion”.<sup>16</sup>

The first important historiographical book about the exodus was published only in 1980.<sup>17</sup> The work of a group of Italian scholars, it considered the event in

the historical context of, first, fascism and then Yugoslav nationalism and socialist revolution, avoiding the victimization of the exiles. From the 1990s onward, all kinds of literature on the topic flourished: accurate historiographical works that examined real and symbolic dimensions of the event,<sup>18</sup> but also numerous memoirs that regret the lost “Italian-ness” of the region, and all kinds of popular, often manipulative, public use of history. In response to this heated atmosphere, the joint Italian-Slovenian Historical Commission was established in 1993 and its report on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century history of the area – a notable undertaking in the construction of common history – was published in 2000. It has, however, neither sparked much public interest nor been taken up by the educators who were its intended audience.<sup>19</sup>

An oral history approach was introduced in 1998 by Gloria Nemeč.<sup>20</sup> In the late nineties the Triestinian “complex” attracted the American anthropologist Pamela Ballinger, whose book on the topic explains many of the exiles’ operations of memory and shows how the hierarchies violently imposed by the fascist regime – between Italians and “Slavs”, between the cities and the countryside – still persist in the memories of the exiles as the “proper ordering of relations between God and people, the dead and the living, the old and the young, men and women”, as “‘traditional’ and hence authentic”.<sup>21</sup> These memories (as well as, after all, those of the Istrian Italians who remained in Yugoslavia) were not free of “complicity in relation to state power”, being influenced by the national political interests of both states at different moments of the post-war era.<sup>22</sup> The memory and the physical presence of the exiles in Trieste have been used, as Ballinger shows, in the official politics that transformed the city of Trieste from a hybrid space as it was in the past, into a purely Italian town.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the substantial amount of historical and anthropological work achieved, what seems to have prevailed in the 1990s is a new political interpretation of the exodus based on recent changes in global political scene: left wing parties, puzzled by the fall of communism, joined in the denunciation of the communists’ crimes, distancing themselves from the partisan movement and earning the dubious reward of a “We told you so” from the political right. In this global framework the memory of the Istrian exodus is part of the wider interest in previously censored memories such as that of Katin or Vinnytsia.<sup>24</sup> But to distance themselves from the Yugoslav partisans in Istria, Italian left politicians had to point to their *ethnic* diversity (forgetting that many Istrian Italians joined the partisans), which lead them directly to the previously mentioned topos of “barbarian Slavs”. The “end of history” and the dominant criticism of “all totalitarian ideologies” with no distinctions made between them, produced an illusion of shared memory which quickly took possession of the memory of Istrian exodus. Representatives of the Italian political left and right organised solemn public meetings dedicated to the exodus.<sup>25</sup> The Italian government’s claims for the restitution of property were renewed and local activities commemorating the *foibe* started to attract politicians at national level.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, in 2004 the Italian Parliament proclaimed the National Memorial Day of the Exiles and Foibe on 10<sup>th</sup> of February, the anniversary

of the 1947 Peace Treaty, as a provocative message of disagreement with the diplomatic settlement of the post-war borders. The dissolution of the ideological contrasts of the Cold War and their transformation into a general discourse of human rights were the frame within which the exiles could be presented as very generic victims of the violence of a regime and thus as absolute victims who by consensus enjoy, like the Jews of the Holocaust, absolute political respect.<sup>27</sup> The ethnic narrative frame has always existed in exiles' memories as a remnant of the polarizations imposed on the Istrian population between the two wars but from the 1990s it became the official interpretation promoted by the Italian state. The extreme right parties had always cultivated the symbolic and manipulative use of *foibe* but after 1989 the position reversed, and the theme of the exodus was taken over by the left. Celebrating the National Memorial Day in 2007 the Italian president Giorgio Napolitano, ex member of the Italian Communist Party, spoke about "a movement of hate and bloodthirsty fury, and a Slavic annexationist plan [...] which assumed the sinister shape of an ethnic cleansing" – statements very close to those of the fascist propaganda of 1944<sup>28</sup>. This fallacious "shared memory" often makes claims to a very abstract humanity and pietas, voluntarily refusing both to name either victims or persecutors and to investigate the crimes committed. Its rhetoric of "reconciliation" reminds us of Ricoeur's warning about the practice of amnesty as a procedure that often authorises intolerable forms of impunity.<sup>29</sup>

What seems to be urgently needed, conversely, is a careful historical analysis of the crimes of each side and a complex collective psychological process of admitting them. The accusation of the "other" for his ferocious nature belongs to the schizo-paranoid phase suitable for war, not for peace; the process through which both individual and collective subjects must go in the times of peace should aim at creating a delicate balance between the awareness of one's own misdeeds and the illusion about the "good self"<sup>30</sup>. In this process some of the topics that are for the time being impossible to elaborate may be separated (but not removed) and stored somewhere, waiting for the time when it is safe to open them up. Those (storage centres) are the places that make it possible for us to live normal lives and so are like graveyards; they are, also, the places where a real encounter between the parties might happen.<sup>31</sup>

Trieste has many sites connected to the memory of the exodus. In the following sections we will visit some of them and try to understand why none has succeeded in overcoming its trauma.

## The Museum

The Museum of Civilization of Fiume, Istria and Dalmatia (from now on: the Museum of Istrian Civilization) was opened in 2015 with a new museological path and permanent exhibition. It is currently held on four floors, the ground floor is dedicated to the temporary exhibitions, bookshop and entrance, while the first floor houses the library, the multimedia and historical centre. The permanent

museum is located on the second and third floors, starting with a documentary that describes Istria as “the tricolour territory”, due to the three different kinds of land: green, white and red. The description is inspired by certain characteristics of the soil, but clearly represents the Italian flag through an explicit symbolism. From prehistoric times to the contemporary period, the historical narration of the Istrian peninsula is a selection of characteristics associated with Rome, Venice and, generally, with the sense of Italian belonging.

The museological style is ‘scientific’, with apparently neutral and objective statements, but it respects neither a time line nor a sequence of events; the focus of the exhibition is the Italian historical line expressed purely in Roman or Italian artefacts. The historical maps and a large reproduction of the Istrian peninsula suspended above the visitor’s head all emphasise the Italian place names, with absolutely no other cultural presence.

Several panels emphasise the Italian roots as the ethnic substrate, with metaphors that freeze identities and languages to the local territory, removing any kind of contamination or contact with the other cultures.<sup>32</sup> On the top floor this construction of an exclusively Italian heritage becomes even more explicit: under the title “Visions and Voices. A journey through the Istrian culture”, the room follows only geographical criteria, with the intention of providing a travelogue. “The journey starts in a distant time and stops at the Second World War, aiming to be a series of still images of the world that the exiles left behind and kept fixed in their memory” says a caption in the museum. The reference to the travelogue as a literary form is not accidental since it was widely used by Western travellers in Istria and Dalmatia during the Enlightenment period when the first orientalist idea of the Eastern coast was defined.<sup>33</sup> It is also arresting to see the attention devoted in this part of the exhibition to the archaeological investigations undertaken by the learned gentlemen of the past (from the Enlightenment to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) in order to find the traces of the Roman empire that lie deep in the Istrian soil.

Most of the documentation, including the fascist sources, is not problematised or contextualised. On the second-floor artistic fragments and illustrious personalities are put together without any narrative or logic. Songs, sculptures, paintings, poems, memories and memorabilia are presented in bulk, in order to produce a conglomerate of decontextualized “Italian-ness”. There are some environmental reconstructions, like the fascist classroom with pictures, books and notebooks filled with typical themes of the regime’s propaganda, such as the colonial conquests in Ethiopia; ironically, the next panel criticises the gloomy books introduced by the totalitarian Yugoslav regime after the war.

In two large rooms the visitor can observe a description of the coastal and rural cultures, with many *topos* of the bucolic and structural nostalgia well described by Clifford and Hertzfeld.<sup>34</sup> The peasants’ typical tools are spread over red soil and a large black and white picture of a small village of former times. Traditional farm implements, bullock carts, grinders and barrels provide an idea of civilization built in the past, fixed and pristine, lost in time. In the background, the photographic

blow-up in black and white shows a female figure from behind, walking alone on a country road towards a small village. She looks slightly curved, and conveys a sense of melancholy, abandonment and loneliness, from the end of time.

At the end of this series, the visitor reaches the nerve centre of the museum, the room with completely darkened windows and no lighting, representing the instances of violence against the Italian population of Istria in the period 1943–1945. This return to historical time is preceded by a highly abbreviated reminder of the two world wars, curiously skipping the period between them (the captions are: “Istria in the Great War” and the next: “The War and the catastrophe – the expansion and the collapse of the eastern border”). The Second World War is presented as the first historical event after the Roman period that interrupted the long continuity of the Italian civilisation of this area, as if nothing and nobody has ever disturbed this pristine community for thousands of years. Reasoning within the traditional historical terms of a narrow national narrative, and completely neglecting the not-so-recent theories about the construction of collective identities (by Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, Anthony D. Smith, to mention only a few), this interpretation of the “catastrophe” of the “Italian-ness” of the Istrian region ignores all other components of what has been, much more probably, a multicultural civilization.

The final climax literally falls on the reconstruction of the killings in the sinkholes; in a distressing and gloomy atmosphere you hear the narrative voices bringing oral testimonies of deaths in wartime. The whole of the narrative construction of the museum sinks metaphorically in this traumatic frozen event, with no chance of overcoming it. To further reinforce the message, an enormous contemporary sculpture sinks from the third to the ground floor representing an abyssal karst sinkhole deep blue in colour, in memory of the victims.

The contrast is striking between the rural Istria tableau with idyllic red soil and the horrid dark room with only oral testimonies of the killings. It looks as if the lost land could not survive in a contemporary time; it is a fixed image, like a time-lapse of the past that could not survive after the tragedy of the *foibe*. Only the abyss, represented with the enormous artistic installation, could metaphorically symbolize this idea of violent historical interruption, impossible to metabolize.

What kind of political discourse is conveyed by this new museum, established 70 years after the traumatic events of the war? The emphasis is on the Italian culture and language, with many artifacts and reproductions of the fascist period with no critical thoughts about historical responsibility. The dichotomic representation between us (Italian exiles) and the other (who exist by subtraction and absence) simplifies and essentialises the ethnic border identities. In this border area the identities were often mixed and contaminated; even after the war many families divided by the secession line continued to live across the border, in a liminal zone ‘between’ rigid nationalistic confinements<sup>35</sup>. It is significant that the historical explanation ends with the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991, as if this “game” of reflected identity could not exist without an opposite, an enemy that nurtures a sense of rigid identity.<sup>36</sup>

There is a political rationality in the birth of every museum, needed in order to organize the historical disorder, to educate the public in offering a conception of knowledge “where things are given in the form of series of sequential connection and of development”.<sup>37</sup> Coombes, Clifford and Bennet<sup>38</sup> described the strict reciprocity between museums and the formation of national identities, the common task of selecting and maintaining memories to create and to confirm an “imagined community”.<sup>39</sup> But here we are dealing with a historical and ethnic museum established in 2015, dedicated to a minority whose current members were born after the Second World War, and whose community was displaced 70 years ago. There is an explicit intention to conserve a specific, separate sense of belonging as Italians from Istria and Dalmatia even though they have been living in Italy for more than half a century. The foundation of this community appears to be connected to the mother language (Italian) and identifies the traumatic events of the sinkhole as a fundamental act of foundation.

Marc Augè enunciated the difference between *forgetfulness* as the abandonment of those components of the past that are relinquished to the memory, and *removal* as the deletion of traumatic events that could cause damage to the identity.<sup>40</sup> In this museum it is difficult to understand whether we are dealing with an act of memory in order to exhume history, or with a traumatized memory that sinks into the depths of karstic caves.

Everyone seeks the ‘true’, objective story, but no one is interested in understanding how to operate the memory, how really to bring to light the underground trauma and stories that cannot be expressed directly; these traces of memories feed a microphysics of violence where victims are still passive subjects manipulated by political propaganda, blocked in a traumatic past<sup>41</sup>. The construction of the sort of ‘imagined’ Istria built by the museum results in commemorative practices and frozen memories in trauma; identity is based on a sense of belonging linked inextricably to a void, similarly to the refugees’ life in camps described by Mallki.<sup>42</sup> Paradoxically, the strong union binding the exiles who share this belonging and its organic sense of uniqueness and undoubtedness derives from the historical fact that their identity is based on homelessness as a founding act<sup>43</sup>. All the processes of identity and cohesion will celebrate and constantly re-found the trauma and the absence. We consider the museum “as a social technology and an institution of public culture” where different meanings and histories of the communities in search of legitimacy are negotiated<sup>44</sup>. Shared memory and its opposite, cultural amnesia, constitute an arena where different materials and theories struggle. In The Museum of Istrian Civilization we find politics of memory based on events that mingle collective history, individual biographies and the social life of things<sup>45</sup>.

## Warehouse number 18

As mentioned above, warehouse number 18 stores the belongings abandoned by the exiles on their arrival in Trieste; it includes furniture, pictures, photos, piles

of dishes, pots, cutlery, books, personal effects, work tools and chairs, hundreds of wooden chairs stacked one on the top of the other, which have become the symbolic visual representation of this exile. The store has only recently been transformed into a visitable semi-exhibition; a kind of authentic place and museum at the same time.<sup>46</sup> It is located in the old disused port of Trieste. There is no free circulation inside this special area: it is not possible to enter without a delegate of the Istrian Association or a museum guide. In fact, visiting the warehouse is only possible with prior authorization and after the identification of the visitor. The old port of Trieste is an 'extraordinary' area with security rules similar to those applied in the contemporary camps for refugees.<sup>47</sup>

The visit is normally guided by the director of The Museum of Istrian Civilization and by some witnesses of the exodus who recount the key and most dramatic events of exile. The area and the objects are evocative and charming in creating a sense of loss through obsessive replication of the abandoned objects. The large heap of abandoned things gives a sense of the traumatic interruption of ordinary life, a kind of black hole in history into which so many families have fallen.

This makeshift exhibition with a sense of serial repetition prompts evocative references to the Holocaust and the photographs of the mountains of seized footwear taken from the deportees to Auschwitz<sup>48</sup>. The narrations of witnesses underline this perception of the past interrupted by escape; the exile thus becomes a founding event for the collective memory and sense of belonging, based on the historical loss<sup>49</sup>. The identity of Istrian refugees seems to be based on a lack, on an imaginary homeland of the past that creates a culture of survival, one that sidesteps contemporary life<sup>50</sup>. Both Warehouse number 18 and the Museum of Istrian Civilisation represent a symbolic death ("catastrophe") that coincides with the forced migration and exile. For this community of displaced people the memory becomes the foundation of social identity that feeds a "culture of survivors"<sup>51</sup>. Trieste as a dislocated settlement therefore becomes the scenario and location of "a past that never passes" and the past becomes crucial to the way of living the present and the future<sup>52</sup>. If the time is out of phase, even the place of origin is no more simply confined<sup>53</sup>; this historical exodus shows a kind of humanity in excess, overflowing national borders and those who cannot find a place where resettlement is possible<sup>54</sup>. The real victims of the *foibe* have thus been used to build an imagined community: violence is the only way in which nationalism can impose an ideal of ethnic uniformity in a multiethnic, heterogeneous scenario<sup>55</sup>.

## The Theatrical Performance

In 2013 the popular Italian singer Simone Cristicchi created a musical show on the theme of exodus.<sup>56</sup> Cristicchi learnt about the exodus from a book written by the journalist Jan Bernas, a popular publication that collects remembrances by the exiles and the Italians who remained in Istria, with a somewhat amateurish

introduction about the history of Istria.<sup>57</sup> The book is a typical product of the above-mentioned “shared” Italian memory, with a strong national orientation supported by the political left and right, identifying the communists as “Slavs”, and the interpretation of the exodus as ethnic cleansing. The author of the book also collaborated on the script of the musical. The show was directed by the well-known stage director Antonio Calenda, and staged in Trieste’s main city theatre, the *Politeama Rossetti*. It enjoyed two seasons of success and was also shown in other theatres in Istria, Fiume and North Italy.

The initial intention, widely announced by its creators, was the “community theatre” which would finally solve the intricate complex of incompatible memories in Trieste. The authors insisted on their civil commitment and their wish to “teach how to remember, without partisanships or ideological prejudices”.<sup>58</sup> Their aim was, quite ambitiously, the “appeasement of the parts”.<sup>59</sup> Cristicchi took inspiration from his visit to warehouse 18, described by him as “the cemetery of the objects”, a kind of an open grave (reminiscent of *foibe*), or, in other words, of an unelaborated trauma. The comparison with the bunch of things abandoned by inmates in Auschwitz is often repeated (quoting Primo Levi), as is the comparison with one of Cristicchi’s previous artistic projects about the personal belongings abandoned by patients in an old mental hospital.<sup>60</sup> Inmates, mentally ill people and exiles are thus placed together in the common destiny of being deprived of their things and their identities, of being expelled from society and “stored” in “other” spaces imposed by institutional discrimination and violence. The stage director even compared Cristicchi’s script to Aeschylus’ *The Persians* for its capacity to speak about the enemies without hate; like *The Persians*, Cristicchi’s musical is “a tragedy of compassion, of the pain of defeat, of the annihilation of a civilisation”.<sup>61</sup> Even though the “annihilation of a civilisation” reminds us slightly of the above mentioned *topos* of the Italian civilization erased by the barbarians from the East, the declared intent was to elevate this pain to a kind of sacred ritual of compassion (“liturgy of piety”), a final appeasement and sublime catharsis. Calenda’s explanation of the main idea of the show culminates in his comparison of the exiles dragging their household goods towards the new country, with Oedipus Rex who also, blinded and defeated by fate, dragged his belongings to Thebes. For Calenda, the image that best represents their show is that of “Oedipus Rex abandoning Istria”.<sup>62</sup> The intent of the authors of the show was thus to raise the historical event to the level of classical, archetypical human tragedy, inevitable fate.

The show, indeed, was very successful in stirring strong emotions. It starts with a funny story of an average Italian archivist from the South, completely ignorant of the history of Istria, who is sent from Rome to Trieste, to warehouse 18, with the task of compiling a register of the abandoned things. There he meets an imaginary “Spirit of the household goods” who gradually unfolds for him the story of those objects. The dialogues are interspersed with songs, which are sometimes accompanied by a children’s choir. The intention of keeping a certain political equidistance in presenting the history is evident in the short episode dedicated

to the fascist violence, represented through a little girl's testimony about a fascist concentration camp. However, the script contains all the historical inaccuracies and bias of its source (the book by Barnes), and presents the Istrian exodus as the annihilation of Italian civilisation in the purely Italian eastern Adriatic coast.<sup>63</sup> It is stated that on the eastern coast "even the stones spoke Italian", the martyrs of the irredentist period are mentioned with great pathos, and the liberation from the German occupation is presented as the occupation by the Yugoslav army. In such a context, the Slovenian girl testifying about the fascist camp seems to be just an intruder, a competitive minor character stealing the show from the main victims, or a small concession to be granted to political correctness.

One song, in particular sung by a children's choir, deserves to be mentioned: "Into the hole" ("Dentro la buca") commemorates the partisans' violence and the *foibe*. Every child in the choir has a long stick in his or her hand, with which they beat the rhythm of the song. The music is fast and amusing, the children's voices enjoyable, hilarious. But the text of the song speaks on behalf of the murdered ("our faces dirty of mud, our bodies blue and white, without a blessing, without a prayer, no escape, just a shot in the neck"). The impact of this scene is perturbing and represents starkly the uneasiness emanating from the show as a whole. The purity of the children's voices, the innocence of the absolute, paradigmatic victims (the exiles, just as the Auschwitz inmates, or the mentally ill people) and the noble desire to raise the conflict to the level of pathos and forgiving have apparently expelled history from the scene, but it has returned forcefully to centre stage through the symbolic representation of real, local and specific structural violence. What is on stage here is not history narrated by historians (including the one trying to narrate between the songs), but history in the Freudian sense, as a succession of disguises of events that are too unbearable to be remembered. Ethnopsychiatry has insisted in recent years on the importance for any successful trauma therapy of a true understanding of the local specificities of political violence.<sup>64</sup> Universal approaches to PTSD, the application of trauma discourse and the insistence on narrative therapy can easily fail if not accompanied by a close reading of the history. Roberto Beneduce quotes the very example of Oedipus as an inefficient pattern of always explaining many, different, historical traumas in the same way, through the creaking of "always the same bed".<sup>65</sup> Psychoanalytical therapy might resemble a theatrical scene,<sup>66</sup> but there is also politics, and not only memory, on this stage. The process of healing cannot be concentrated only on individual, or isolated, memory of the loss; it also needs to be political and comprehensive of all the dynamics of the society. If it is ignored, the history of violence can break into the scene in the form of the uncanny – something horrific that sounds familiar – just as happens in Cristicchi's entertainment show.

There is a lot of 'removed past' in the narration of the exclusively Italian identity of Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia, especially when it is presented in generic pietistic clothes. The contaminated or fluid origins, and the identity different from what is conceived by the official national history, may continue to live in the present as a symptom.<sup>67</sup> The general human compassion promoted by the authors of this show

is based on the Christian values whose authority may represent, paradoxically, an obstacle to a real confrontation with the past. When historical questions become abstract moral issues, history is blurred and it becomes impossible to reach a common sense of citizenship based on secular values.<sup>68</sup> “Compassion automatically attributes all the victims to the dominant culture.”<sup>69</sup> The authors of this show tried to heal the divided collectivity of Trieste by representing the Istrian exodus as a tragedy similar to that of Oedipus Rex. At the same time, just as at the Museum and the Warehouse number 18, they based it on exactly that definition of the identity of this collectivity in which the trauma had its roots.

<sup>1</sup> Marica Karakaš Obradov, *Novi mozaici nacija u 'novim poredcima'. Migracije stanovništva na hrvatskom području tijekom Drugog svjetskog rata i poraća*, Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2014; Marina Cattaruzza, Marco Dogo, Raoul Pupo, *Esodi. Trasferimenti forzati di popolazioni nel novecento europeo*, Naples: ESI-IRCI, 2000.

As Liisa H. Malkki noted, the period after World War II was not only one of mass displacements, but also of the standardisation of the main ways of managing them (techniques such as refugee camps, for example) and of the birth of “the refugee” as a specific social category. Lisa H. Malkki, “Refugees and Exile: From ‘Refugee Studies’ to the National Order of Things”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1995), pp. 495–523, p. 497.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Marfleet, “Displacements of Memory”, *Refuge*, 32/2016, pp. 7–17; Patrizia Audenino, *La casa perduta: la memoria dei profughi nell'Europa del Novecento*, Rome: Carocci, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Pamela Ballinger, *History in exile. Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> Malkki, “Refugees”, 518.

<sup>5</sup> Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands. Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*, London, New York: Routledge, 2013; Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy. Social Poetics in the Nation State*, Oxford: Routledge, 1997; Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Macdonald, *Memorylands*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation. Activists on the language frontiers of Imperial Austria*, Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> This migration would later be interpreted as the pre-announcement of the Istrian exodus after the World War II in its exclusively ethnic understanding, which ignores the political and ideological conflicts of the period between the two wars. Ballinger, *History*, 67–72.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of this migration, see Marino Manin (ed.), *Talijanska uprava na hrvatskom prostoru i egzodus Hrvata 1918–1943*, Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Costantino Di Sante (ed.), *Italiani senza onore. I crimini in Jugoslavia e i processi negati (1941–1951)*, Verona: Ombrecorte, 2005; Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *I campi del Duce. L'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista (1940–1943)*, Torino: Einaudi, 2004.

- <sup>11</sup> This symbolical representation is the basis of the “politics of submersion” as defined in Ballinger, *History*, 131: submersion in the literal sense of subterranean spaces and “exhumatory politics” and, metaphorically, in the sense of silenced histories and buried memory.
- <sup>12</sup> Franko Dota, *Zaračeno porače. Konfliktni i konkurentski narativi o stradanju i iseljavanju Talijana Istre*, Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2010, p. 12.
- <sup>13</sup> *Rapporti tra Italiani e Sloveni dal 1880 al 1956. Relazione della Commissione storico-culturale italo-slovena*, [http://www.kozina.com/premik/indexita\\_porocilo.htm](http://www.kozina.com/premik/indexita_porocilo.htm) (26.11.2017).
- <sup>14</sup> Two historians from Trieste, Raoul Pupo and Roberto Spazzali (*Foibe*, Milano: Mondadori, 2003, pp. 4–5) have discussed the use of the term *foibe* in historiography and concluded that, even though it is not an exact historical term, its widespread use makes it impossible, now, to cancel it from the discourses of historians. However, according to the two authors, it should be used in a symbolic sense, not a literal one. This warning might seem to avoid the manipulative use of the term but in fact it does not, since its symbolical meaning includes “all the victims of the repression, regardless of where and how they died”, which of course may cause important misunderstandings, as the two authors seem to be aware.
- <sup>15</sup> On Italian antislavism as form of racism see Enzo Collotti, “Sul razzismo antislavo”, in: Alberto Burgio (ed.), *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia 1870–1945*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999, pp. 33–61; Marta Verginella, “Antislavismo, razzismo di frontiera?”, *Aut Aut*, 349/2011, pp. 30–49. The metaphorical and ideological use of the term *foibe* has been analysed from a psychoanalytic point of view by a group of authors (Luisa Accati, Renate Cogoj (eds.), *Das Unheimliche in der Geschichte. Die Foibe. Beiträge zur Psychopathologie historischer Rezeption*, Berlin: Trafo, 2007, see in particular the introduction by Renate Cogoj, pp. 9–23) who drew on Otto Fenichel’s use of the Freudian term *Unheimliche* and his understanding of antisemitism as a projective fallacy about the supposed otherness of the Jews. This theoretical frame makes it possible for the group of authors to detect, within the discourse on *foibe*, racism against “Slavs”.
- <sup>16</sup> Ballinger, *History*, 129.
- <sup>17</sup> Cristiana Colummi et al., *Storia di un esodo. Istria 1945–1956*, Trieste: IRSML FVG, 1980. The volume was preceded by some historiographical works, mainly by Galliano Fogar and Giovanni Miccoli, that tackled the migration movement within a more general frame of Istrian history.
- <sup>18</sup> To mention only few of them: Roberto Spazzali, *Foibe. Un dibattito ancora aperto*, Trieste: Lega Nazionale, 1990; Raoul Pupo, *Il lungo esodo. Istria: le persecuzioni, le foibe, l'esilio*, Milano: Rizzoli, 2005; Jože Pirjevec, *Foibe. Una storia d'Italia*, Torino: Einaudi, 2009.
- <sup>19</sup> *Rapporti tra Italiani e Sloveni*, [http](http://www.kozina.com/premik/indexita_porocilo.htm). According to Marta Verginella, although the Commission’s aims were praiseworthy, its work remained under the influence of exclusively national perspectives. It brings them closer to each other but does not introduce a really new way of writing the history of this border area. The only approach capable of grasping its intermingling relations and fluid identities would be that of shared history (*histoire croisée*), still missing from the work of local historians. Marta Verginella, “Zgodovinjene slovensko-italijanske meje in obmejnega prostora”, *Acta Histriae*, 18, 2010, pp. 1–2, 207–216, 212, [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu).
- <sup>20</sup> Gloria Nemeč, *Un paese perfetto. Storia e memoria di una comunità in esilio: Grisignana d'Istria 1930–1960*, Trieste and Gorizia: IRCI, LEG edizioni, 1998. In her most recent work Gloria Nemeč analysed medical records of Istrian refugees hospitalised in the

psychiatric hospital in Trieste: *Dopo venuti a Trieste: storie di esuli giuliano-dalmati attraverso un manicomio di confine 1945–1970*, Trieste: Alphabeta Verlag, 2015.

- <sup>21</sup> Ballinger, *History*, 186.
- <sup>22</sup> Ballinger, *History*, 12.
- <sup>23</sup> Ballinger, *History*, 28–33. The same, on the other side, happened with the now homogeneously Croatian Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia. See also Marta Verginella, “L’esodo istriano nella storiografia slovena”, in: Cattaruzza, Dogo, Pupo, *Esodi*, 269–277.
- <sup>24</sup> The comparison is taken from a 1943 fascist propaganda article, quoted in Marta Verginella, “Geschichte und Gedächtnis. Die Foibe in der Praxis der Aushandlung der Grenzen zwischen Italien und Slowenien”, in: Accati, Cogoj, *Das Unheimliche*, 25–76, 59.
- <sup>25</sup> The reference is to the famous encounter in Trieste between Luciano Violante and Gianfranco Fini in 1998.
- <sup>26</sup> The war in the ex-Yugoslavia that was going on in those years certainly facilitated this new political trend, as well as the very use of the term “ethnic cleansing”. See Dota, *Zaračeno*, 45.
- <sup>27</sup> Guido Franzinetti, “The Rediscovery of the Istrian Foibe”, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte und Kultur Südosteuropas*, VIII/2006, S. 85–98, S. 89, [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu).
- <sup>28</sup> See, for example, *Corriere della Sera*, 19/01/1944.
- <sup>29</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, Paris: Seuil, 2000, p. 585.
- <sup>30</sup> The two positions of child’s development, the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive, are drawn from Melanie Klein and applied to the collective psychology of war and the post-war situation in Trieste in Paolo Fonda, “Das Unheimliche als inneres Fremdes”, in: Accati, Cogoj, *Das Unheimliche*, 105–139.
- <sup>31</sup> Fonda, „Das Unheimliche”, 135–138.
- <sup>32</sup> For the concept of ethnic identity, see Jean-Loup Amselle, *Branchements. Anthropologie de l’universalité des cultures*, Paris: Flammarion, 2001; Ugo Fabietti, *L’identità etnica*, Roma: Carocci, 2002; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- <sup>33</sup> Larry Wolff, *Venice and the Slavs. The Discovery of Dalmatia in the age of Enlightenment*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- <sup>34</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1988; Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy*.
- <sup>35</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, New York: Routledge, 1994; Marta Verginella, *Il confine degli altri*, Roma: Donzelli, 2008.
- <sup>36</sup> Francesco Remotti, *Contro l’identità*, Bari: Laterza, 1996; Michael Taussig, *Mimemis and Alterity. A Particular History of the Senses*, New York, Oxon: Routledge, 1993.
- <sup>37</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London: Tavistock, 1970, p. 262.
- <sup>38</sup> Annie E. Coombes, “Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities”, in: Bettina Messias Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, Malden, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012, pp. 260–272; Clifford, *The Predicament*; Tony Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*, Oxon, New York: Routledge, 1995.
- <sup>39</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, New York: Verso, 1991.
- <sup>40</sup> Marc Augé, *Le forme dell’oblio. Dimenticare per vivere*, Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2000.
- <sup>41</sup> Ballinger, *History*, 26–27.

- <sup>42</sup> Malkki, "Refugees".
- <sup>43</sup> Stefano Pontiggia, *Storie nascoste. Antropologia e memoria dell'esodo istriano a Trieste*, Roma: Aracne, 2013.
- <sup>44</sup> Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz et al. (eds.), *Museum Frictions*, Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 2, p. 11.
- <sup>45</sup> Roberto Beneduce, *Archeologie del trauma. Un'antropologia del sottosuolo*, Bari: Laterza, 2010, pp. 14–15; Fabio Dei (ed.), *Antropologia della violenza*, Roma: Meltemi, 2005.
- <sup>46</sup> Similarly, the refugee camp and the old houses of the exiles in the area of Padriciano near Trieste have recently been opened to the visitors.
- <sup>47</sup> The comparison of the Istrian exiles with today's refugees stirred a heated debate in February 2016, when the historian Roberto Spazzali in an interview characterised it as an unacceptable parallel (*Il Giornale*, 3 February 2016). Spazzali's position reflects the intent to create an unique, absolute, ahistorical event out of the exodus. Paradoxically, today's refugees who arrive in Trieste settle, among other places, in the so called Silos, an abandoned warehouse that had once been a refugee camp for the Istrian exiles. There are other historical paradoxes connected to the city's sites and the history of migrations: one of the places where the Istrian exiles in Trieste were accommodated was also the ex German concentration camp of Risiera, the only concentration camp in Italy with a crematorium, partly destroyed when abandoned by the Germans. For the new post-war purpose of accomodating the Istrian refugees the building was renewed and repainted, thus destroying important traces of its horrific memory.
- <sup>48</sup> For a critical reading about the ambivalent representation of violence see Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of the Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003 and Taussig, *Mimesis*. In 1976 Giovanni Miccoli defined the comparison between foibe and holocaust as "aberrant" ("Risiera e foibe: un accostamento aberrante", *Bollettino dell'IRSML FVG*, IV/1976, 1, pp. 1–4).
- <sup>49</sup> Malkki, "Refugees".
- <sup>50</sup> Macdonald, *Memorylands*.
- <sup>51</sup> Pamela Ballinger, "The Culture of Survivors. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Memory", *History and Memory*, 10/1, 1998, pp. 99–132.
- <sup>52</sup> Pontiggia, *Storie*, 15, 25.
- <sup>53</sup> Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- <sup>54</sup> Michel Agier, *Aux bords du monde, les refugies*, Paris: Flammarion, 2002.
- <sup>55</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact. Essays on the Global Condition*, London, New York: Verso, 2013.
- <sup>56</sup> Cisticchi's musical was not the first product of popular culture on the topic. In February 2005, when the national memorial day was celebrated for the first time, Italian national television RAI showed the movie *Il cuore nel pozzo* (*The heart in the well*), which got viewing figures of 10 millions. The movie gave an extremely biased interpretation of foibe and exodus, directly associating them with the holocaust. For an accurate analysis of the film see Verginella, "Geschichte und Gedächtnis". While we are writing this article, a new movie on the topic is being filmed, entitled *Rosso Istria* (directed by Maximiliano Hernando Bruno and with Geraldine Chaplin), based on the story of the rape of Italian girl.
- <sup>57</sup> Jan Bernas, *Ci chiamavano fascisti. Eravamo Italiani. Istriani, fumani e dalmati: storie di esuli e rimasti*, Milano: Mursia, 2010.

- <sup>58</sup> Jan Bernas in the booklet accompanying the show *Magazzino 18*, Trieste: Il Rossetti, 2013, p. 7.
- <sup>59</sup> Simone Cristicchi in the booklet accompanying the show *Magazzino 18*, p. 10.
- <sup>60</sup> Cristicchi, *Magazzino 18*, 24. Even though Cristicchi refers to mental illness in general, it is important to remember that one of the approaches within refugee studies has elaborated a quite deterministic link between migration and mental illness, promoting “psychologising modes of knowledge” and “subtly reinforcing the depoliticizing and dehistoricising tendencies” of the functionalist model based on the sharp contrast between a supposed stable identity of a sedentary society and the unnatural uprootedness of displacement (Malkki, “Refugees”, 508–510). However, the psychiatric aspects of the Istrian exiles’ experience remain an interesting field of study, as has been shown by Gloria Nemeč in her above mentioned book.
- <sup>61</sup> Antonio Calenda in the booklet accompanying the show *Magazzino 18*, 14.
- <sup>62</sup> Calenda, *Magazzino 18*, 15.
- <sup>63</sup> For a highly critical analysis of the historical inaccuracies of the show see AAVV, *Da Sanremo alle foibe. Spunti di riflessione storica e culturale sullo spettacolo Magazzino 18*, Udine: Kappa Vu, 2014.
- <sup>64</sup> For the relation between psychoanalysis and (removed) history see Roberto Beneduce, *Archeologie*, 87–110. For the uncanny in relation to the memory of *foibe* see Accati and Cogoj, *Das Unheimliche*.
- <sup>65</sup> Beneduce, *Archeologie*, 99.
- <sup>66</sup> Beneduce, *Archeologie*, 109.
- <sup>67</sup> Freud explained this mechanism in his provocative analysis of the origins of the Jews, as shown in Beneduce, *Archeologie*, 93.
- <sup>68</sup> Giovanni Leghissa, “Die Grenze als Metapher – Notizen zur italienischen Identität aus Postkolonialer Perspektive”, in: Accati, Cogoj, *Das Unheimliche*, 141–178.
- <sup>69</sup> Luisa Accati, “Opfer und Täter zwischen Gerechtigkeit und Straflosigkeit”, in: Accati, Cogoj, *Das Unheimliche*, 213–248, 217.