



M O J
D O M

FINAL CONFERENCE MOJ DOM - Report Memories of home in the past and the future.

About the project

How do you make a home away from home? How do you leave one place and settle in another? These are the questions that the Moj Dom project—meaning 'My Home'—addresses. It's been 30 years since the wars that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the way people remember these wars, the migrations, and the emotions tied to them still shape lives, relationships, and policies in many territories today.

Moj Dom explores the different interpretations of the Yugoslav Wars, focusing on the challenges that arise from the erasure or instrumentalisation of memories. The goal is to spark [collective reflections](#) on how a traumatic event impacts the sense of home for those forced to migrate.

The partners conducted hundreds of encounters, primarily in-depth interviews, to gather personal stories and experiences related to the sense of home and displacement. They also employed other collection tools, such as focus groups, public events, images and soundscapes, artistic presentations, and workshops in schools, universities, and non-formal education centres.

Many people were met, each with their own unique story. Among them were individuals who lived through the wars that accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia and who, as a result, were forced to emigrate to other regions or countries, leaving their homes behind. We also connected with their family members, including those who were children in the 1990s or young people born in the newly formed states. Encounters extended to members of the host communities and the activist scene, both from the 1990s and today, as well as experts from various artistic, historical, social, and cultural fields. Special attention was given to engaging with university and high school students and educational centres.

Drawing from the findings, an [educational toolkit](#) has been developed and tested for schools to help students understand the complex historical, social, and political processes involved. This toolkit is crucial in promoting inclusive identities and ensuring that young people understand peace and coexistence.

In Italy, four collection days were organised. These were public events at which members of the diaspora or groups that welcomed people fleeing the wars in the former Yugoslavia were asked to bring an object associated with the sense of home. All the collected objects, stories, and memories became a significant part of a [photography exhibition](#).

The artistic reinterpretation of the collected testimonies and materials is crucial to the project. In addition to the photo exhibition, this includes a monograph on how those who lost their homes have expressed their displacement through art, a [short film](#), and an original [theatre performance](#) based on the collected testimonies.

Moj Dom: Refugees, migration, and erased memories in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars is a European-scale project funded by the CERV Remembrance program of EACEA.

Partnership

[Codici](#) – leading partner

An independent organisation based in Milan (Italy) promoting research and transformation initiatives in the social field. It supports organisations, institutions and networks in understanding and accompanying social changes. The actions it proposes and the languages it experiments with arise from the desire to give words and power back to the people.

[Documenta – Center for Dealing with the Past](#)

Founded in Zagreb (Croatia), Documenta contributes to developing individual and social processes of dealing with the past to build sustainable peace in Croatia and the former Yugoslav region. It aims to deepen the dialogue and initiate a public debate on policies that encourage dealing with the past, such as collecting data and publishing research on war events, war crimes, and human rights violations.

[Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research \(IEF\)](#)

A centre for ethnological, cultural-anthropological, folkloristic, ethnomusicological, and related scientific research based in Zagreb (Croatia). The institute has a strong research background in war ethnography, which recently led to the creation of the long-track program “Legacy of the Nineties: Discourses and Everyday Life,” dedicated to research and public knowledge dissemination.

[The Institute for Social Research in Zagreb \(ISRZ\)](#)

A public research institute based in Zagreb (Croatia). ISRZ conducts fundamental, applied, and developmental policy research in sociology, social sciences, and humanities. ISRZ advocates for implementing its research findings in public scientific, educational and social policies by collaborating with competent ministries, governmental agencies, governmental bodies, educational institutions and civil society organisations.

[Laboratorio Lapsus](#)

Lapsus is a non-profit organisation based in Milan (Italy) focusing on contemporary history research, educational activities, and public history. It develops projects with students and young people of any educational level, promoting an active learning methodology. Lapsus has also carried out history-harvesting initiatives, exhibitions, theatrical shows, documentaries, and oral history projects across Europe.

[Maska Ljubljana](#)

It is a non-profit organisation based in Ljubljana (Slovenia), internationally renowned for producing socially and politically engaged theatre. It publishes a performing arts journal in three double, bilingual, annual issues, each dedicated to a specific topic. Maska’s Seminar for Contemporary Performing Arts is an all-year-round program of lectures by internationally acclaimed scholars, artists and writers.

[Peace Institute](#)

Based in Ljubljana, it is an independent research institution dedicated to contemporary social and political studies and interdisciplinary research in sociology, political science, anthropology, and law. The institute’s activities are not limited to critical assessment of social phenomena but also include active intervention. It combines academic research with policy-oriented activities.

[University of Graz](#)

The Department of Southeast European History and Anthropology is Austria’s primary academic hub for studying the Balkan region’s history and culture. Research areas include historical anthropology of the Balkans, intercultural comparisons, and the social dynamics of gender. Additionally, it investigates themes such as tradition versus modernity, social structures, migration, and the origins of ethno-nationalism in the former Yugoslavia.

[University of Regensburg](#)

Since 2017, the University has established the Center for International and Transnational Area Studies (CITAS), a platform for bringing together various disciplines and area studies. The University focuses particularly on Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

Funded by the European Union.

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or CERV. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Project site: <https://mojdomproject.eu/>

Animation, illustration, and graphic design: Ivana Ognjanovac and Mare Šuljak - Web development: Vedran Gligo

Final conference of the project Moj Dom | Refugees, migrations and erased memories in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars.

The project consortium has worked diligently to make the research findings accessible to a broader audience by hosting them on the Moj Dom website. This platform serves as a comprehensive repository for all scientific materials produced during the project, ensuring that individuals and organizations can easily find and utilize the information. Additionally, the consortium has actively promoted the website through various dissemination work packages, which include webinars, newsletters, and social media campaigns designed to increase visibility and engagement. Efforts have been made to reach a diverse range of stakeholders, including academic researchers, policymakers, industry professionals, and the general public who may have an interest in the findings. The goal is to foster collaboration and knowledge sharing within the scientific community as well as among those who may benefit from the research in practical applications. By providing easy access to these resources on the project website, the consortium hopes to encourage further exploration of the material and to inspire new ideas and innovations based on the findings. Users can navigate the site to discover a wealth of information, including detailed reports, data sets, and other educational materials. Overall, the consortium is committed to ensuring that the knowledge generated from this research has a lasting impact and reaches as many people as possible.

CONCEPT

After a war, there are memories—both painful and joyful. After migration, displacement, or relocation, many emotions emerge. Home is a central concept in rebuilding the narrative of one's interrupted story. A home can help organize memories, symbolizing safety and belonging. At the same time, it can represent a constant sense of loss, especially for those who continue to change homes or feel uprooted entirely. What does the thought of home trigger in people? What social and political issues does it represent? The final conference "Moj Dom: Memories of Home in the Past and the Future" offers a reflection that starts from the individual stories of those who lost their homes in the Yugoslav wars and moves toward the narrative of a generation and a society in transformation.

The conference will also aim to present personal stories that intertwine with those of cities and towns, such as the former Yugoslavia and Italy. These stories reveal a significant transformation: the impact of conflict on models of social solidarity. One of the main questions we ask ourselves is if the sense of home changes with the passing of generations. Many people still do not speak about their experiences of war, displacement, or migration. But the past is also an opportunity to look more closely at these scars. So, what does it mean to pass the past on to new generations? What ethical responsibilities does this involve? What stories should we tell, and with what care? Understanding the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s is not just an academic exercise but a crucial process for young people to grasp complex

historical, social, and political dynamics. For this reason, the Educational Toolkit Moj Dom, designed for formal and non-formal education, will be presented at the conference.

PANEL:

Monday, 18.11.2024 National museum Slovenia Metelkova

Introduction of the project Moj dom
Lorenzo Scalchi and Sara Troglio (Codici)

PANEL 1. BEDROOM

What is home after war?

After a war, there are memories—both painful and joyful. After migration, displacement, or relocation, many emotions emerge.

Home is a central concept in the process of rebuilding the narrative of one's interrupted story. A home can help organize memories, symbolizing safety and belonging. At the same time, it can represent a constant sense of loss, especially for those who continue to change homes or feel completely uprooted. What does the thought of home trigger in people? What social and political issues does it represent?

This panel offers a reflection that starts from the individual stories of those who lost their homes in the 1990s, and moves toward the narrative of a generation and a society in transformation.

Giulia Loda and Lorenzo Scalchi (Codici), Ivana Ognjanovac (independent multimedia artist), Lana Zdravković (Mirovni inštitut)

Moderated by Gregor Moder (Maska Ljubljana)

PANEL 2. WINDOWS

Activism, hospitality and news models of social solidarity

Personal stories intertwine with those of cities and towns. Split and Modena, two cities connected by the stories of those who received and provided aid between the former Yugoslavia and Italy. These stories reveal a significant transformation: the impact of conflict on models of social solidarity. The history of these two cities in the early 1990s helps to understand the shifts in political and economic systems

Petar Bagarić and Orlanda Obad (Institut Za Etnologiju I Folkloristiku), Greta Fedele and Erica Picco (Laboratorio Lapsus)

Moderated by Emina Bužinkić (Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose, Zagreb)

Tuesday, 19.11.2024 National museum Slovenia Metelkova

PANEL 3. LIVING ROOM

Speaking of the past to the future

We are in the present, facing many young people. We ask ourselves if the sense of home changes with the passing of generations. There are still people who remain silent, not only in the former Yugoslavia. They do not speak about their experiences of war, displacement, or migration. However, the past is not only a bond to be severed, which can also bring relief, but it is also an opportunity to look more closely at these scars. So, what does it mean to pass the past on to new generations? What ethical responsibilities does this involve? What stories should we tell, and with what care?

Anja Gvozdenović (Institut Za Društvena Istrazivanja U Zagrebu), Emina Bužinkić (Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose, Zagreb) and Heike Karge (Universität Graz)

Moderated by Zala Dobovšek (Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television Ljubljana)

PANEL 4. KITCHEN

Understanding the past for the future

Understanding the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s is not just an academic exercise, but a crucial process for young people to grasp complex historical, social, and political dynamics. For this reason, the Educational Toolkit Moj Dom was created, designed for use in both formal and non-formal education.

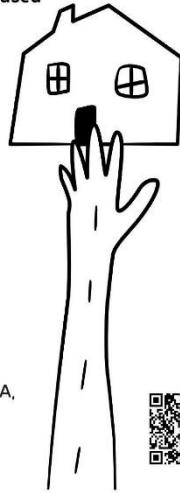
The toolkit is intended for teachers, educators, as well as anyone who wishes to explore it.
Moderated by Alice Straniero (Documenta - Centar Za Suocavanje S Prosloscu Udruge) and
Zeno Gaiaschi (Laboratorio Lapsus)

MOJ DOM

MEMORIES OF HOME IN THE PAST
AND THE FUTURE - LJUBLJANA

Final conference of the project Moj Dom:
Refugees, migrations and erased
memories in the aftermath
of the Yugoslav wars.

NATIONAL MUSEUM
SLOVENIA METELKOVA,
MAISTROVA ULICA 1
18. 11. 2024
15.00-19.00
19. 11. 2024
10.00-13.30



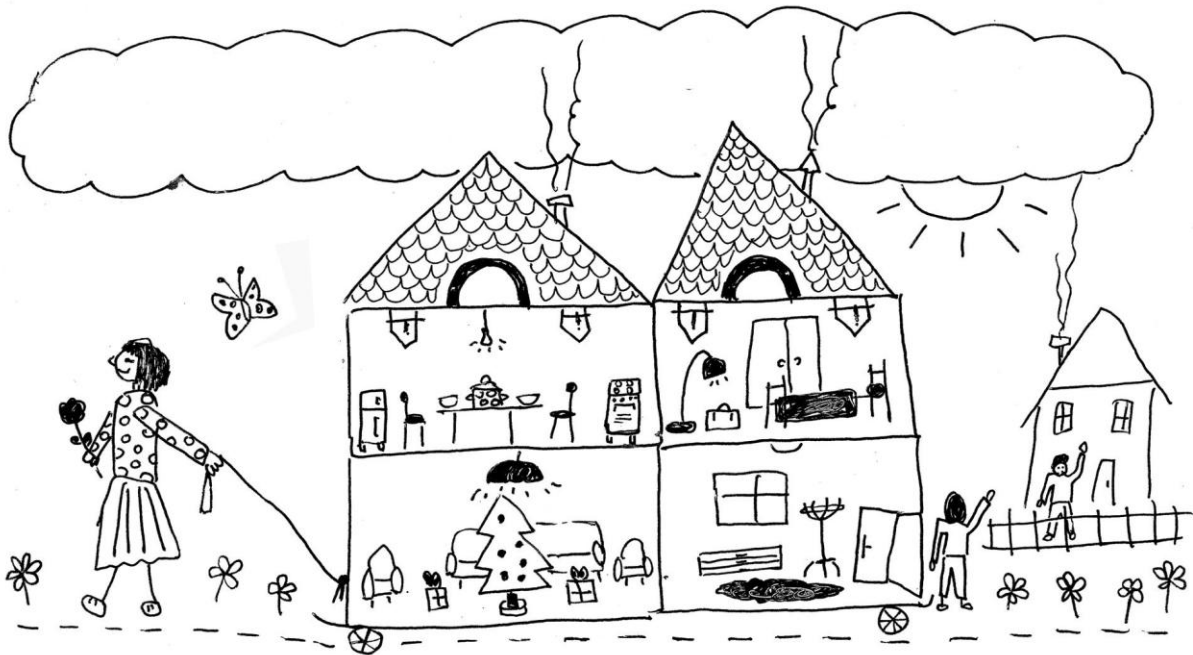
Artistic programme

DANCE THEATRE LJUBLJANA,
PRIJATELJEVA ULICA 2A
19. 11. 2024
17-22.30



Texts discussed during the conference:

Introduction: if the project Moj Dom were a house



What makes a house my home? Faced with an empty house, one often feels lost. It's a feeling experienced by many who have had to flick after a significant change in their lives. For those who have lived through war, an empty house can represent a suspended life, a time frozen, waiting for a new beginning. Some see war as merely a phase of the past and don't want their new home to remind them of it. For others, the sense of belonging is tied to how well they have adapted to their new environment and how much they have suffered the loss of their previous home. These stories are personal but also generational, political, cultural, and social. Thirty years after the wars that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Moj Dom, through its research actions, has offered different spaces for meetings: conversations, interviews, focus groups, public events, and much more. The texts presented in this section are a reworking of the research results by those who participated in the project. The themes vary but are connected by the thread of memories, which are put into perspective to understand the present better. We can imagine Moj Dom as a house: its strength lies in creating spaces that enhance encounters and the stories evoked by the objects within it. Without many words, the objects keep the memories of the past alive. If Moj Dom were a living room, these objects would help to create an atmosphere of sharing. In the courtyard, words and stories could be exchanged with neighbours, while essential decisions for the future would be made in the kitchen. The most intimate memories would be stored in the bedroom, perhaps in a small suitcase. The texts gathered here begin with painful memories (of war, loss, and uprooting), but they help to explore their importance on a personal and political level. Feelings like nostalgia can be both an obstacle and a driving force for change, just as happened at the end of the socialist Yugoslavia era when the war led people to reconsider their relationships. The ability to tell one's own story is just as important. Still, it doesn't depend only on the storyteller but also on the listener's ability to recognise the value of those memories. A final part of these texts, particularly the last ones, reflects on the need to create spaces and moments for speaking and sharing to allow those who have experienced traumatic events to reconnect with or find common ground with others who have lived through similar situations. This takes place thirty years after the events of the 1990s, reflecting on the importance of time and

place. Being young and not living through that era does not mean one cannot enter the house of Moj Dom's stories. This project enriches historical memory and helps create contexts of attention and care where storytelling and listening become tools for growth and mutual understanding. If the Yugoslav wars have not yet found a definitive resolution, it may be because the process is still ongoing and not just political. Understanding how this process unfolds, promoting more humane and empathetic models of solidarity, welcome, and care, is fundamental for fostering broader social change, a change that is crucial even beyond the geographical boundaries of that region.

Towards a new sense of home

Authors

Giulia Loda is an aspiring social researcher, collaborating with Codici and exploring topics such as migration, memory, activism, and community storytelling.

Lorenzo Scalchi is a social researcher at Codici who studies various topics, including international migrations, memories, and social inequalities.



«There is a word that I have not yet found in Italian and wish existed: Tuđina. [...] It means everything you go through in the integration process: hostility, not being understood, not being considered, being mistreated... this word means 'tear that never falls'. It is a sad word that never leaves you. It means not being able to sink into nostalgia when you are struggling and in a difficult situation.»

What is the role of nostalgia in the context of a migratory trajectory? When and how does it develop from a sense of loss? Many of the stories that Moj Dom has given voice to are imbued with nostalgic feelings: for the past self, for the broken community, for a shattered ideal, for the home that was and will never be the same again. Nostalgia then appears as the memory of a loss that still bleeds and that feeds on the memories of war and emigration.

«Nostalgia is a very poisonous plant, which can sometimes be used as a herbal tea.»

However, nostalgia also works as a driving force: on the one hand, to identify one's needs, desires and objectives, to recognize meaningful relationships; on the other, generating experiences of activism and solidarity, humanitarianism and hospitality driven by an ideological-political push. Nostalgia seems essential to strengthen the foundations and rebuild on the rubble. From here, for many people, a reflection on their survival arises: what is left of the "me" of before? How have I become after the war and migration? Talking about oneself, after so many years of silence, also means dusting off and reinforcing those social devices that allow one to address the splits, strengthen the cracks, and, ultimately, face the journey of rediscovery and reaffirmation of personal and collective history: between past and present, towards an interpretation of the concept of home in a relational sense.

Loss and nostalgia

This article and the following one are intended to be consequential and complementary: a path is outlined from the past to the present and the future, from loss to reconquest, from dissolution to reconstitution. We orient ourselves within two semantic planes opposed to each other from the point of view of emotional connotation: melancholy and hope. The pivot of this circular itinerary, starting point and arrival simultaneously, is the sense of home.

This path starts from the stories of people who moved to Italy during the 1990s and the early 2000s and of people who, in that historical-geographical context, organized humanitarian aid and created host communities to support the refugee population. Their experiences are different but often intertwined and, in some respects, overlapping. They have in common the experiences of uprooting and new rooting, losses – substantial or on the level of the collective imagination – and mending.

The reflection in this first contribution starts from the concept of loss and is full of references to the past: breaking, mourning, and missing. They are framed both on an individual level, concerning one's home, one's family, one's relationships, and on a collective level, of one's land, of the Nation to which they belonged and which no longer exists, of one's citizenship that changes with the disintegration of the Yugoslavian State. Here, memory's most desolate, painful, and even traumatic components are explored. In particular, the role of loss in forming nostalgia is explored, inspecting the latter's etymology and its multiple meanings. Furthermore, nostalgia's less obvious character to common sense is made explicit, the constructive one, and the generator of change, which is further elaborated in the following study.

Loss and then...

Uprooting oneself involves abandoning, leaving, losing, perhaps abandoning oneself, and losing oneself. By uprooting oneself, many different parts of oneself are lost. One's name is cut off. There are those who, having arrived in Italy, experience the deformation of their name or surname by someone who does not know their mother tongue: this results in fear of not being recognized or understood. One abandons one's language and, with it, a bond of visceral belonging, which conveys feeling, living, and being. One loses identity: it is hidden and concealed because it no longer has a caring paddock to express itself. One leaves one's origins, family, and territory: for a child, it is the premature anticipation of an ordinary, announced, prefigured experience; for an adult, it is the origin of a deep, gripping sense of guilt.

Mending

Certain cuts heal. In this sense, some tools are particularly beneficial. Art, for example, helps heal the cracks in existence: on a collective level, it is a way of testifying that there is the possibility of repairing the course of events; on an individual level, it takes on a therapeutic function to the extent that it represents, in fact, a medicine for the soul. In particular, some of the people interviewed came into contact with theatre in the context of their experience of displacement. This functioned as a rescue device: comedy has the power to scale down the gravity of events to make it possible to survive them. A second path, equally healing for open wounds, consisted in some cases of redefining the relationship with the words of one's mother tongue, renegotiating their uses and reappropriating them. There are those who, faced with the disorientation caused by the distortion of their surname by those who welcome them, came to terms with a new pronunciation and identified with a new dimension, different but equally legitimizing. There are also those who, unable to use their mother tongue to express themselves artistically, become translators from the latter to Italian, generating bridges and broadening their audience, thus bringing it closer to a less fragmented but fuller self.

Bleeding again

Certain cuts, on the other hand, are more profound. There is an element that is common to the losses experienced in the context of the Yugoslav wars: their sudden, unpredictable, and, for this reason, particularly violent nature. The immigration from Yugoslavia to Italy was impossible to prepare in advance. It was expressed in rapid tears, which strained the ability to recover those memories. This, in turn, undermined the ability to rework what happened. Such a loss, which hinders a part of the self, preventing its expression, is familiar to both the pragmatic dimension of those who were overwhelmed by the need to migrate and to the ideological dimension of activists and volunteers who operated in Italian or Yugoslavian territory, in the name of shared rights and ideals: peace or socialism. They experienced a sudden interruption of their projects and prospects, producing a laceration in the horizon of possibilities that they envisioned and aspired to. Nonetheless, for those who faced displacement, the sudden loss is further burdened by a sense of betrayal, which arises from the self-attribution of guilt for the abandonment of those left behind.

Getting lost

Nevertheless, some losses remain painful even in the long term. At an individual level, for example, a significant loss comes from a change in one's status. This is common to many migration stories, even diverting from the specific context of Yugoslavia, and undermines a certain sense of personal stability. The transition from a relatively comfortable position to one of restrictions and sacrifices is disorienting, forcing one into a limbo where the supports to hold on to are elusive. Moving from the private to the public dimension, what dissolves is the reference to a homeland to which one can no longer belong. Some people who left their homeland felt that the concept of 'being Yugoslav' had suddenly disappeared. Conversely, some activists still recall today the regret for the broken Yugoslavian dream: what disappeared here were the shared values, which constituted the basis for the communion of intent between individuals, between associations, between institutions, even towards the latter, a motion of distrust arose. In both situations, the aim is to return, whether to the self or the group, as these were prefigured in a more complete past. It is no coincidence that many of the stories collected are studded with nostalgic references.

Finding oneself

Cultural theorist Svetlana Boym (2001) [defines](#) nostalgia as the desire for something that is no longer there, or that has never existed. Furthermore, she illustrates two dimensions: the restorative one, directed towards the past and marked by the loss and the desire to rebuild the old, and the reflective one, directed towards the future, which conceives the possibility of transformation, imbued with passion, hope, and critical thinking.

«Nostalgia is the memories of the people with whom I spent my early childhood and shared the foundations of my life. These are the memories of the fundamental bricks of the house.»

«Nostalgia is a cage that holds you back. But sometimes it is useful for self-awareness, for appreciating human relationships; I am talking about nostalgia for that mutual care in difficult moments.»

Nostalgia can entrap: desire constraints when unattainable because it is suffocated in a concluded time. Yet, immobilizing oneself in the past sometimes renders a need for survival, which finds no other expression. In this sense, the anchoring that characterizes restorative nostalgia can be salvific: it is still a drive, an insatiable form of recovery. Faced with loss, we relate to the collective identities from which we flee or seek refuge. Some run away, but attempting to escape is the opposite of surrendering: it is, instead, an attempt to recover the richness of one's life, untying it from the external connotations that were scratched.

On the other hand, reflective nostalgia can become a resource for constructing a new community of a collective identity. We can then speak of an 'active' nostalgia, which in different ways would unite activists/volunteers and migrants: both, moved by a nostalgic feeling, have become active for the reconstruction of identity networks and, therefore, of an idea or a place, that can be home, concretely or metaphorically. Without a sense of belonging, individual identity would remain frayed. Feeling at home, then, puts one's pieces back together. In particular, certain specific belongings are strengthened and renewed, while others that were more encompassing have lost their original consistency. For example, the revival of a singular national identity, where the Yugoslavian one is no longer applicable, heals a certain sense of fragmentation.

Rebuilding

As mentioned, the nostalgia experienced and narrated by Italian volunteers and activists towards the former Yugoslavia can also be considered from two points of observation, which differ from a temporal perspective. First, the interviewees' experience speaks to nostalgia for a past not experienced firsthand but which, before disappearing, represented an ideal. This is nostalgia for real socialism, the political and economic system that existed in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The nostalgic feeling then turns to Yugoslavia because it embodied, in History, not only the possibility of existence but also an example considered virtuous – at least in the 'alternative' narratives promoted by volunteers and activists. The doors open here to a traumatic dimension of the awareness of the end of a shared dream. It is not just a generational bond. Even in younger volunteers – who identify with the same political values - the memory is similar: less tied to a reality that was experienced "live" from the point of view of temporal placement, albeit at a distance, but more associated with knowledge acquired through study, information and exchange.

Nostalgia for Yugoslavia takes on, in particular for those who identified with the values of the political left, an identity dimension to the extent that it is ideological. Regret for the socialist ideal then becomes the driving force of action: one becomes active for the former Yugoslavia to try to save what had been a possible world, to safeguard the hope that that reality was not destined to disappear, but that it could be reconstituted.

«In the 90s, I worked at the Belgrade Cultural Institute, where I found a type of socialism that made me think of Europe as I pictured it: free, educated, fair, with an excellent social and health system and an egalitarian housing allocation system. When the Italian government bombed Yugoslavia, I resigned and remained close to my Yugoslav friends and colleagues: it was better to stay with my back straight.»

Secondly, a nostalgic feeling is produced in volunteers and activists in conjunction with the lack of a place that, by living there, had become familiar. It coincides with an experience that came when the experiences of mobilization ended, and the protagonists returned to their previous lives, irremediably marked by the experiences lived in the field. This nostalgia is freed from ideological elements but is emotionally rich and primarily linked to the relationships that volunteers and activists had woven during their travels in Yugoslavia, which became an acquired homeland for these people. In this case, too, nostalgia is crucial for their life trajectories, to the extent that – referring, among other things, to experiences lived in particularly delicate years from a formative point of view – it pushed them to work in areas that allowed them to have still something to do with it, or even to live there for more or less long periods.

«[...] I continued to keep in touch with the former Yugoslavia because it had become a full-blown illness for me. There is a lot of talk about the longing for Africa, but there is also the longing for the Balkans [...] Now... I want to go and eat ćevapčići in Croatia... well, if I think about it, I feel nostalgic...»

We understand, then, that even those of activists and volunteers are cuts that, to heal, have—or would have had—needed the encounter with other cuts of similar origins and forms to be put in communication and narrated, a space that would restore the value due to such a personal and collective experience.

Conclusion

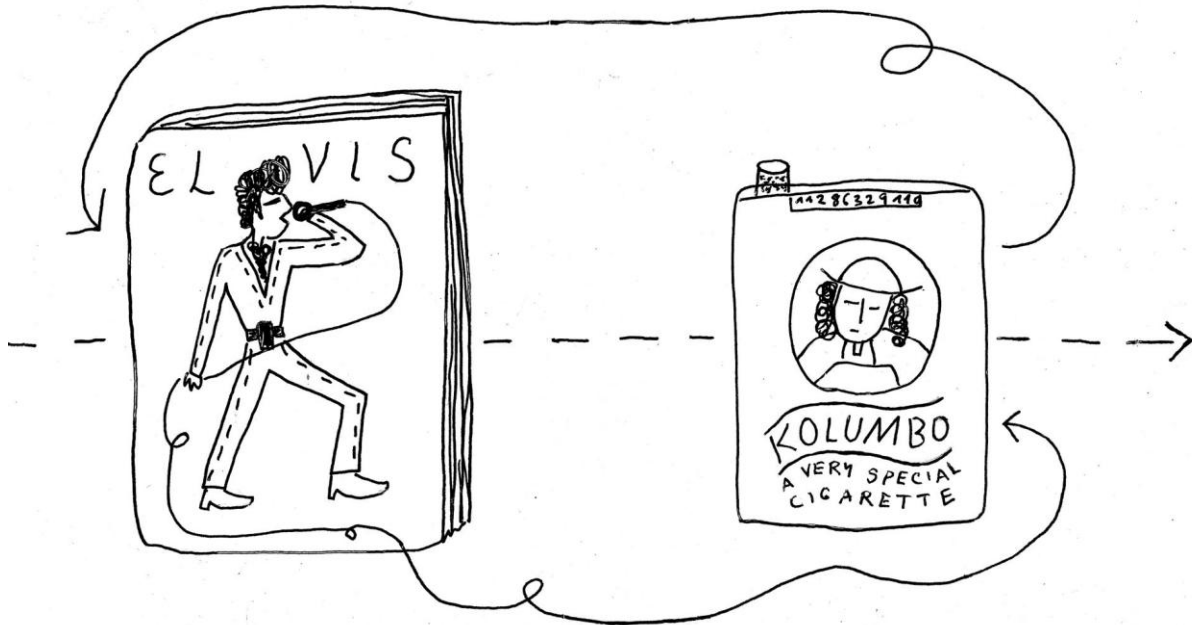
Nostalgia is, at the same time, a symptom and an antidote to loss. It is water that revives an open wound, but it is also a stitch that prepares the skin for a new race, perhaps for new falls. Keeping alive the memory of that race—and of those falls—and caring for it together with those of the races and falls of others is what produces the healing process and cultivates the reconstruction process, individually and collectively.

Rebuilding the self in individuality and group identity, rebuilding the ideal or real community, passes through memory, but only if put into dialogue, in a protected, comprehensive, welcoming, relational space, where the sense of home, uprooted and re-rooted, can reproduce itself.

How an NGO changed Split

Author:

Petar Bagarić is a researcher and employee at the Institute for Ethnology and Folkloristics in Zagreb. His areas of interest have included dervish practices, forced migrations, the anthropology of labour, the anthropology of the senses, the anthropology of organization, and phenomenological anthropology.



At the beginning of the 1990s, Split was a gloomy place. The military front line was about 30 kilometres away as the crow flies. The city was more or less cut off from northern Croatia, and the journey to the capital often took 12 hours. In Croatia, Split carried the flattering title of the grad slučaj (the problem city due to the omnipresent problems of drug addiction and crime). I was one of the many refugees in a boys' boarding school, trying to understand the world's workings with my adolescent mind. The collage of impressions that built this understanding included news from the war front, rumours from the streets, news from Croatia, Bosnia, and the world, scenes of soldiers waiting for transport to the front, drunk soldiers returning from the front, and people who, with the arrival of spring, went to the Riva to enjoy the peace and tranquillity provided by the Mediterranean scenery of pine trees, sea, and sky. Dealers and drug addicts were an integral part of the scenery and every social circle.

Few of us adolescent refugees had severe problems with hard drugs. Drugs were expensive, and we were broke. «For free» was our motto and our most profound value. A friend and I watched an amateur film about Jesus' temptation in the desert, organized by a Protestant church from the USA, which had decided to start its missionary activities in Split. The film was poorly projected on a sheet hung on the wall, but it was a free cinema trip in the middle of winter. We could sit in a warm room for an hour and get cakes and juices. I attended the Hare Krishna ashram for a while. On Sundays, they held lectures followed by vegetarian meals. After a while, they clarified that they expected some donations as compensation for the meals, so I parted ways with them. It's a shame because their food was delicious. At one point, Jehovah's Witnesses showed interest in me. But since they weren't ready to spice up the Bible message with some concrete foods, I also had to part ways with them.

So, not everything was terrible in my existence, but it was pretty bad in Split. The scenery of drug addicts, criminals, soldiers, stressed and underpaid teachers in school, and caregivers in the boarding school was complemented by the army of former workers from the collapsed Split industry. I made a good deal with one of them. I had a calendar with pictures of Elvis Presley, and he had a nearly empty box of the cheapest cigarettes, Kolumbo («Columbus»). He wanted Elvis, and I wanted cigarettes, so we traded. We walked away from each other with smiles on our faces.

I was quite confused, scared, and maybe, most importantly, poor at the time. But looking back from a distance today, Split had it worse than I did. We refugee adolescents gathered in our rooms and deliberated about life and the world. We were pretty different from each other and had different views on life and the world, but we almost all agreed on one thing: «Split is crap». No matter how hard it was for us, and although we all adopted a dose of nihilism, the city seemed to have fewer chances than we did.

In such a situation, somewhere in the spring of 1995, some psychologists from the MIRTA association came to the boarding school. It is important to note that this began a new economic and social system in Croatia. Socialism had ended just five years earlier. New words for new phenomena of the new system were just being introduced, and «association» was one of them. So we didn't understand what they were doing or who they were. We only figured out that they were psychologists. «Association», «project» – what could that be? We didn't even care. They offered something – acting, dancing, comic strip courses, some self-improvement workshops (whatever that was supposed to be), and apparently some trip with food and drinks- all FREE. How could we say no?

Those people

Thirty years later, while conducting field research for this project (in the meantime, I learned what the word «project» means), I found out that the name of the MIRTA association was an acronym around which a group of individuals, primarily psychologists inspired by reality therapy, gathered. These people later left their mark on the Split NGO scene. Their enthusiasm and belief in positive change set them apart in my experience of that period. The psychological self-improvement workshops that included envisioning the future, identifying one's strengths, and recognizing what we could do to achieve our goals (which also needed to be defined) sometimes felt disjointed and even created discomfort. Igor Longo, one of those psychologists, told me in an interview thirty years later that much of their activities at the time were improvisations. They had no prior experience working in such situations and were trying to apply their skills and knowledge, shaped in a civilian context, to an extraordinary situation. But that improvisation wasn't what felt disjointed in 1995. What felt disjointed were the prompts to think about the future, the prompts for optimism, and the seriousness with which they insisted on hope and change. As a feeling and perspective, despair was the standard for us living in Split at that time. Cynicism in the speech was considered good taste. Respectable people who care about themselves wouldn't openly express hope and faith in change and community action.

And yes, some volunteers working with us shared their frustrations. People in city government institutions were often uncooperative. Relatives and friends wondered why someone would spend time on such things, etc. It should be noted that apart from the general despair that pervaded Split at that time, an obstacle to successful volunteer work in the NGO sector was that the non-governmental organization sector, as a sort of intermediary institution, was beginning. The NGO sector faced the huge task of achieving social recognition, creating a legal framework, creating a positive media image, networking, and securing stable financial resources.

The 1990s were unfavourable for the NGO sector in Croatia. Citizens held negative attitudes towards associations, and the government actively sabotaged the development of the NGO sector. Reliance on external funding sources made existing associations easy targets for accusations of being foreign agents. Funding from George Soros's Open Society Foundation was precarious in this regard. I remember one of the rumours from that time on the streets of Split, which claimed that some associations were involved in cross-border child trafficking. The rumour referred to the practice of sending children from war-affected areas to countries like Italy for rest and de-traumatization. The experience of one of our interviewees, who was a school-age girl at the time, regarding her trip to Italy goes like this:

«They took us everywhere. We went swimming. I remember that Francesca made super calzones, pizzas, and a ton of pasta, and we ate pasta all the time and mostly just had some super food, swimming, and fun. Nothing bad happened. Everything was relaxed, and there was constant laughter» (Deša 1.6.2023)

Another challenge for humanitarians in Split was the situation the citizens of Split were in. The average salary for those lucky enough to still receive it was around 150 DM (75 EUR) in 1992, and many citizens

expressed dissatisfaction with what they perceived as the attention and finances directed towards helping refugees. For example, from 1992 to 1995, the European Union provided 171,000 tons of food through various programs, averaging 5 to 6 thousand tons per month. Other donors provided 130,000 tons of humanitarian aid during that time. The flow of humanitarian assistance decreased in early 1994, while the needs of displaced refugees and other needy people remained around 12,000 tons per month. In such a difficult economic situation, humanitarian work on refugee aid projects for some international humanitarian organizations, which were heavily engaged in Croatia then, could represent a step towards solving one's existential problems for potential activists. Although stressful and often chaotic during that period, engagement with an international organization frequently ensured a decent salary.

War is over

With the war's end in Croatia, local humanitarians found new activity niches. Although the war was over, the system still housed a significant number of refugees and displaced persons who couldn't return to their homes. The return posed a separate challenge, so part of the NGO efforts was directed towards assisting with return-related problems. Even if we exclude the issue of refugees and displaced persons who still hadn't returned to their homes, Croatian society was left with enough problems for the NGO sector to address. According to a survey conducted by the United Nations Development Programme, even eleven years after the war, in 2006, every tenth person in Croatia was socially excluded. The legal framework at that time still did not recognize certain categories of social exclusion, such as homelessness, and had no mechanisms to address this problem appropriately. Searching for new knowledge, a group of social welfare experts from Split travelled to Modena, Italy, in 1995 and were inspired by the principles of volunteer work:

«We then saw that in Modena, which has 180,000 people, every sixth resident [...] is involved in some program of helping someone. That was fascinating to us. Every sixth means 30,000 people, which was an additional input for us. And it was then an additional strong impulse for us to wake up in Split. And Split woke up [...] We got inspired in various directions. We conveyed our experiences and insights much more enthusiastically. We spoke, talked, and encouraged with enthusiasm» (Longo, 1.7.2023)

The enthusiasm of the NGO sector, fortunately, met with a favourable reaction from the city authorities, and the culture of primary social care in Split could begin to change:

«There was an expansion of hopelessness. Split was then at the bottom on many levels – industrially and economically. Hotels were all devastated as they had been housing refugees for years. And in that context, there was an economic transformation [...] but also a human one. But, as in life, when you hit the bottom, you will start to rise. And Split started to rise. The city social welfare department fought for funds for the NGO sector in the city council [...] we worked together on a strategy. The MI Association initiated the establishment of a forum of associations, which allowed associations to participate and discuss the common problems of the sector actively [...] we obtained a complete structure for empowering the NGO sector» (Barbarić, 28.6.2024)

A look back

Thirty years after encountering the Mirta association, I found a completely different situation in Split. In the meantime, the city, primarily thanks to tourism, has transformed from an infrastructurally neglected misfortune town into a beautiful destination. The NGO sector in Split has gained social recognition, and the volunteer scene is vibrant. Đordana Barabarić from MOST received the City of Split's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2021, and the association MOST received the Collective Award of the City of Split in 2016. Nives Ivelja, whom I met in 1995 at the boys' boarding school, is currently the director of the MI association and served as the president of the first session of the National Committee for the Development of Volunteering. Their efforts, along with those of their colleagues from the NGO sector, have resulted in, among other things, amendments to the Volunteer Act in 2021 and changes to the Residence Act. In recent years, Split's media have readily reported on volunteer actions initiated by local associations, and all members of the associations I interviewed happily highlight the willingness of fellow citizens to participate in community work. Even before the war, NGO activities emerged in Split, where various interest groups of citizens, such as parents' associations or professional societies like the psychological

society, sought to address current problems and find solutions. However, the NGO sector took its full form during the war, using available resources in the form of their expertise and the organizational and material support of international organizations, often driven by an admirable dose of enthusiasm, to help the vast number of refugees and displaced persons housed in Split at the time. After the war, the need for work with refugees ceased, but the now well-trained members of the NGO sector used their skills to change their city's empathetic structure gradually.

Working with refugees in the Nineties

Author:

Petar Bagarić is a researcher and employee at the Institute for Ethnology and Folkloristics in Zagreb. His areas of interest have included dervish practices, forced migrations, the anthropology of labour, the anthropology of the senses, the anthropology of organization, and phenomenological anthropology.



This story about civil society in Split is based on interviews conducted in 2023 and 2024 with some of the actors on the Split civil scene. It is primarily based on the information obtained through these interviews. The text demonstrates the formative nature of working with refugees in the 1990s for the Split NGO scene.

Although the NGO sector is primarily symptomatic of developed liberal societies and reached its full momentum in Croatia with the fall of communism and the introduction of democratic changes and capitalist economy in the 1990s, civil society in the former Yugoslavia had its precursors in the form of various religious and humanitarian organizations and cultural and artistic organizations, as Suzana Kunac points out in her text *Od demokratizacije do neoliberalnih strukturnih reformi* ("From Democratization to Neoliberal Structural Reforms", to apply their existing knowledge to the new situation. Igor Longo, one of the leaders of this scene, who was working as a psychologist at the Center for Juvenile Persons Without Adequate Parental Care at the time of the refugee wave describes his experiences with the refugee wave that hit Split due to the war: Kunac 2013: 116-117). This phenomenon is directly related to the liberalization of the social context from 1974, and consequently, various student, ecological, and similar organizations emerged in Croatia during the 1980s (ibid.). One of the crucial determinants of civil society in Croatia, which notably defined the Zagreb NGO scene, was the fight for democratization and individual freedoms, which began in the 1980s as the struggle for the institution of conscientious objection and civilian service in the Yugoslav Army. The further work of these civil society associations was marked by working with refugees in the early 1990s (ibid.) and the struggle to promote democratic values in a society where the HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union) party held increasingly important levers of power in the 1990s. Of course, equating the entire Zagreb NGO scene with progressive associations is unnecessary. Currently, over 12,000 associations are registered in Zagreb, including religious associations, veterans' associations, sports associations, etc. However, for the purposes of this text, we can take left-liberal provenance associations as a recognizable marker of the Zagreb NGO scene, especially considering

that a significant part of today's city government in Zagreb, led by Mayor Tomislav Tomašević, was recruited from this ecosystem. In contrast to the Zagreb NGO scene, the Split NGO scene is primarily organized around the efforts of people who, until the 1990s, were professionally and usually within the system, in various ways, involved in helping activities in the community, whether working with children with special needs, socially disadvantaged individuals and families, drug addicts, and similar groups.

Numbers

Many individuals who would become champions of the Split NGO scene, who were already involved in helping work through social care institutions or within the then-few associations in Croatia, such as the DUGA – Youth Action for Help, began working with refugees in the early 1990s. The war in Croatia, which started in 1991, and the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which began in 1992, led to a vast number of refugees and displaced persons seeking accommodation in Croatia. In December 1992, in Croatia, which had a population of about 4,800,000 in 1991, there were 260,705 registered displaced persons and 402,768 refugees. Most of the actors discussed in this text began working with refugees ad hoc, trying to apply their existing knowledge to the new situation. Igor Longo, one of the leaders of this scene, who was working as a psychologist at the Center for Juvenile Persons Without Adequate Parental Care at the time of the refugee wave, describes his experiences with the refugee wave that hit Split due to the war:

«I had the opportunity to see when forty or fifty mothers with their children came to the institution and tried to integrate into that closed system. The institution's capacity at that time was about 130 children, and we added about 40 mothers and their children. And we all lived together. The institution was overcrowded then, but we did what could be done. It was a situation where we couldn't consider some space and equipment standards. It was necessary to provide shelter for people». (Longo 29.6.2023)

To illustrate the logistical pressure that the arrival of refugees and displaced persons represented for Split, it should be noted that in a city with just under 200,000 residents, according to the last census, there were nearly 60,000 registered refugees and displaced persons by the end of 1992.

To Talk or Not to Talk

In addition to logistical challenges, future NGO workers, who were still employed in state and city social care organizations or various educational institutions at the time, faced a lack of skills needed to respond to such a situation but also built skills that would manifest in their future work:

«Many children experienced terrible life traumas: lost parents, were in camps, refugee camps. There were many levels of traumatic experiences, and the knowledge of a psychologist who had worked in a kindergarten or school until then was not adequate. In the 1990s, a new capital of social and professional resources was created that did not exist before» (Đordana Barabarić 29.6.2023.)

A significant part of the activities working with refugees involved attempts to create a sense of normalcy. Activities were conducted to distract from traumatic experiences and reality, children were assisted in overcoming school obligations, and routines were organized where refugees were accommodated in group housing to help them connect and take on constructive roles in the new situation. The emphasis in working with refugees was primarily on meeting basic needs. However, the question arises about what falls under primary needs because refugees often find themselves in a position where their existence is reduced to mere survival. One of our interlocutors claims that someone must satisfy some "needs of the soul" to feel like a human being. For example, she smuggled a hamster for a girl in collective accommodation because the girl longed for contact with animals and a pet. Refugees needed to be occasionally provided with a sense that they had some guaranteed place in the community where they found accommodation, which could be ensured by acts such as restaurant celebrations. In the initial period of caring for refugees, there was an accelerated dissemination of knowledge about dealing with forcibly displaced persons among professionals. However, the beginning of this work was primarily marked by enthusiasm and attempts to apply existing knowledge to the new situation:

«We were learning. It is always good to define some main principles and rules at the start, as the Americans would say, ground rules. In those years, we wanted to do something for people, but in this situation, we are talking about not everything being defined in advance. Because at first, we didn't know how many people would come. For example, ten women with children would come. And then suddenly,

twenty more would come. And so, some things you had defined for yourself and them and maybe changed together with them. There couldn't be the same number of people in the room. Now, there would be more. Someone would sleep on the floor. There was no other option, and we couldn't build a new floor. Many things were unknown to us. How do you communicate with people who are going through trauma? Should we avoid talking or engage in conversation? The Society of Psychologists quickly translated brochures. UNICEF played a big role in how to work with children. Experiences from Zambia, for example, were shared. We were learning some things on the go. And there were mistakes. And not all refugee populations are the same» (Longo 29.6.2023)

Another skill activists learned on the go was dealing with stress and the general consequences of such demanding work. As described by Drago Lelas, who was actively involved in helping refugees as a member of the DUGA association as an adolescent and student at the time:

«There was an American psychologist who told me how to proceed... It was tough for us to cope with those stories. Even the Americans who came here to volunteer were not experts, but it just happened that one American woman had some psychology experience. She wasn't even a certified psychologist but had some therapeutic knowledge... The only supervision we had was a good party on Friday. We would meet on Friday evenings at the space of the Society of Dystrophics. They gave us a space to drink three or four beers to survive more easily» (Lelas 29.6.2023.)

And Now What

With the end of the war in 1995, some people who participated in helping refugees within institutions during the war left their jobs and decided to continue their helping work within NGOs. As they stated, one of the primary reasons for this decision was the reduced opportunity that working within an institution provided in terms of defining problems in the community and the reduced space for creativity in seeking solutions. They found inspiration for their future work in Modena, where they witnessed a developed culture of volunteering. Under the impression of that experience, they founded the association MOST, which to this day promotes the values of volunteer work at the city level:

«Our model emerged from a story where professionals from health and social institutions in Split were in Modena and saw the great volunteer engagement of citizens. The concept of volunteering was unclear to us then, nor was this issue somehow opened in the public space. In socialism, this helping moment was a value that was present but somehow left to individual engagement. In the 1980s, that value somehow got lost. The war period and post-war period here reopened the dimension of solidarity because we had a huge number of refugees in Split» (Đordana Barbarić 29.6.2024)

Instead of a Conclusion

One of the symptoms of the social transition from socialism to capitalism and from a one-party form of government to electoral democracy is the establishment of civil society associations whose activities are closely linked to the culture of volunteer work. The development of the Split NGO scene during the 1990s was marked by the adaptation of skills of professionals from various social care fields to the new situation, as well as by the enthusiasm and volunteer work of the members of associations and humanitarian organizations. In this situation, specific know-how was formed through work with refugees, children with special needs, and other socially vulnerable groups, which would be further disseminated to newly established civil society associations with the growth of the Split civil scene in the 2000s. Unlike the Zagreb civil scene, which was strongly characterized by issues of personal freedom and the struggle for democratic values, the Split civil scene focused on social issues. Working with refugees and vulnerable groups shaped the skills and resources needed for effective assistance. At the same time, inspiration from international models of volunteerism enabled the establishment of associations that will mark the Split volunteer scene in the coming time.

Petar Bagarić is a researcher and employee at the Institute for Ethnology and Folkloristics in Zagreb. His areas of interest have included dervish practices, forced migrations, the anthropology of labour, the anthropology of the senses, the anthropology of organization, and phenomenological anthropology.

Ontology of post-Yugoslavianism in recent debates

Author:

Lana Zdravković is a researcher, publicist, political activist, and artist. Her work focuses on political engagement, radical equality, and the praxis of the militant subject. She is affiliated with the Peace Institute for Contemporary Social and Political Studies and co-founded the KITCH Institute of Art Production and Research. Her artistic interests include the neo-liberalization of art, political performance, pornography in art, and kitsch and trash art.



Home is where the heart is. Home is where you feel safe, where your family and your kids and partner are. Home is where you feel accepted, acknowledged, and established. Recognized, respected, relaxed. Home is where I am. Wherever I live, I feel at home. I can establish a home wherever I go. Home is where I was born and raised. There is only one home. My home does not exist anymore, I moved so many times, but I will never feel at home anymore. My home is lost forever.

These are some of the answers from the people I talked to who had to leave their homes in the former common state of Yugoslavia due to the war. Some came directly to Ljubljana, while others moved several times before ending up in Slovenia. Some for a longer, some for a shorter period. I share their feelings, as I have experienced exile as well. I was born in Mostar and lived in Sarajevo, which I left in 1984 during the Olympics. I lived in Belgrade until 1999, when, during the NATO bombing, I moved first to Maribor and then to Ljubljana. I also had to create my own home several times. I belong to the generation of 1974, a momentous year in Yugoslav history. It is marked by the proclamation of Tito as lifelong president and the adoption of a new and the last Constitution of the socialist state, which strengthened the decentralization and federalization processes. The specificity of my generation is that we travelled even without moving – born in one country, growing up in another or several others. The dissolution of Yugoslavia deeply marks my generation. We were exposed to starting our adult and professional lives during the transition period within newly founded ex-Yugoslav nation-states. Born during what was already often referred to as a period of Yugoslav crises, we grew up with the promise of a very different life than the one we faced. While we were raised in line with the ideology of brotherhood and unity, in the process of a socialist Yugoslavia was dispersed, the only ideologies we were left with were the toxic mixture of banal ethno-nationalisms and wild neoliberalism.

Yugoslavia was not a classical nation-state but rather «A project, idea and political and social experiment» (Jović 2023) based on the values of non-alignment, antifascism, anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism. Shaped by the ideology of self-managed socialism, it was never a democracy in the

dominant understanding as parliamentarism (“bourgeois political system”). Unlike the representational system, which presents the existing, Yugoslavia was based on the idea of creating a new, utopic, not yet existing world. The transformation process of the existing presupposed the permanent revolutionary progression, which would lead to a state of equality. The primary carrier of political identification was not class, nation or ethnicity but working people. That is why creating a homogenous Yugoslav nation in the traditional sense was never encouraged. Yugoslav identity was always plural and in the making through multilingualism, regional and local development and the high autonomy of republics and provinces. That is precisely why Yugoslavia, according to Dejan Jović, “[withered away](#)” (2009). Although the newly formed nation-states were created precisely based on the principle of self-determination right guaranteed by the constitution, they paradoxically built their new nationalist identities on strong anti-Yugoslavism. The key ideological tool of new political elites of the (post)Yugoslav countries was to label all those freely expressing their critical positions against the new anti-Yugoslav mythologies as Yugonostalgics.

«Precisely because of the elusive nature of nostalgia, the authorities in the new states of former Yugoslavia have coined the term Yugonostalgia and given it an unambiguous meaning. The word is used as political and moral disqualification: the Yugonostalgic is a suspicious person, a ‘public enemy’, a ‘traitor’, a person who regrets the collapse of Yugoslavia (and hence the collapse of communism, and communism is ‘Serbo-Bolshevism!’), a Yugonostalgic is the enemy of democracy. The term ‘Yugonostalgia’ belongs to the new terminology of war.» ([Ugrešić 1998](#))

With the dissolution of the country, the revisionist discourse became mainstream. What was once the hegemonic socialist Yugoslav memory narrative was replaced with a new pseudo-democratic post-socialist anti-Yugoslav memory narrative. One of the current examples that continues this trend is [a text](#) written by M. Kasapović (2023), which condemns Yugonostalgia as being blind to the fact that Yugoslavia was the most unsuccessful European country of the 20th century, which bloodily collapsed twice in the seventy years of its existence. She characterizes the idea of post-Yugoslavism as an unsustainable ideological construct, which, due to ideological and political beliefs, professional interests or an intellectual trend, is driven by nostalgic intellectuals, artists, cultural and NGO workers, who mainly originate from the intellectual diaspora, which was created by the emigration from the newly formed countries after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

But, as exposed by [D. Markovina](#) (2023) this kind of discourse reveals a symptom of the fear of Yugoslavianism as such and of any critical questioning of reality. It recreates the rooted reflex from the nineties, according to which the only meaning of the modern nation-state is exhausted in rejecting any Yugoslav heritage and post-Yugoslav context (i.e. Yugocomunizem symptom). Instead, he claims that the true legacy of Yugoslavia and its success should ultimately be measured by how it influenced its citizens’ lives. Yugoslavia, in general, has changed in just a few decades to such an extent that it has jumped several centuries in such a short period of time. It lifted a whole generation out of poverty, urbanized and modernized the country, enabled the vertical mobility of society, educated people en masse and built most of the public infrastructure we still use today.

Still, anti-Yugoslavism, which has been manifesting itself as an unavoidable common denominator for all policies of ex-Yugoslav countries, has also been indirectly strongly supported by European tendencies. In the context of several European declarations and resolutions condemning and remembering “victims of all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes”, revisionist efforts in ex-Yugoslav countries were legitimized, and Ustashe and Chetnik movements were fully revived as legitimate ideologies and forces in World War II, even more so as victims of the Yugoslav “totalitarian communist regime”. The ex-Yugoslav space was even renamed to follow revisionist tendencies and to avoid any references to a common past. We now inhabit Southeastern Europe, or the Western Balkans, or simply “the Region”. Historical revisionism worked hard towards erasing any mention of Yugoslavia, unless it represented the Dark Ages, in order to discredit any positive memories or even reflections on the socialist Yugoslav period. In such circumstances, Yugonostalgia emerges through [Svetlana Boym’s](#) concept of counter-memory (2001), understood as memory created in public spaces without state control and control of dominant discourses of political elites, and as such, is being translated into reflective nostalgia (ibid.).

The fact is that more than 30 years since the violent dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia, the talk about this country is still highly emotionally charged and situated in the registers of passion, pain, sentimental recollections, or nostalgia, as exposed by [T. Petrović and A. Hofman](#) (2023) As a positive emotional attitude of people towards (their) socialist past, Yugonostalgia is partly reduced to consumerist and consumption practices and relationships. But it is never just passive, unreflective, restorative commodification and fetishisation of lost socialist world objects and symbols. The sensory memories of the former Yugoslavia deeply connected to the material traces of socialism play a much more important, reflective and politically relevant role, as emphasized by [T. Petrović and J. Mlekuž](#) (2016). Understood in this way, Yugonostalgia can also be active and political.

«That kind of nostalgia would primarily mean the legitimization of mourning for Yugoslavia in intellectual circles. So, it is permissible to mourn Yugoslavia and its real, productive and still important achievements, some of which are directly written into today's world crisis of capitalism, such as equality, the right to work, health care, gender equality and so on.» ([S. Slapšak 2008](#))

Seeing politics in the post-Yugoslav space unravel as a continuation of war by other means, Yugonostalgic memory narratives can become “by definition, subversive, anti-system and emancipatory” ([M. Velikonja 2011](#)). As a “retrospective utopia” (ibid.), it can also be a dissident discourse and a strategy of resistance against current injustices on the one hand and against condemning the past and compulsory amnesia on the other. Moreover,

«Nostalgia, as a discursively constructed set of ideas, should be seen and interpreted as part of an ideology that enables individuals and groups to establish and argue their positions and status in a given social and historical circumstance.» ([Petrović 2010](#))

T. Petrović [asserts](#) that today's revisionist and banal understanding of Yugonostalgia is actually denying individuals any possibility to be taken seriously (2012), so denying Yugonostalgic subjects of any political subjectivity. On the contrary, understanding the importance of the affective and the emotional aspects of the memory of socialism can be crucial for the political subjectification of postsocialist subjects in the present day. The political element of nostalgia is revealed in moving from passive sentimentalism to the (possibility of) articulated resistance. As a meta-national narrative, Yugoslavism enables us to transform Yugonostalgia for the future into Yugoslavism that acts in the present ([Popović 2021](#)). Today, Yugoslavism, as a meta-national identity, is difficult to grasp within our traditional concepts of nation, does not represent an ethnonational community nor demand a nation-state to be (re)created, yet persists as another layer of people's identities. In that sense, Yugonostalgia can doubtlessly be one of the kernels of resistance against dominant ideologies and practices, such as ethno-nationalism and neo-liberalism. This makes nostalgia a practice with a mobilizing, legitimizing, and even an emancipatory character. (ibid.)

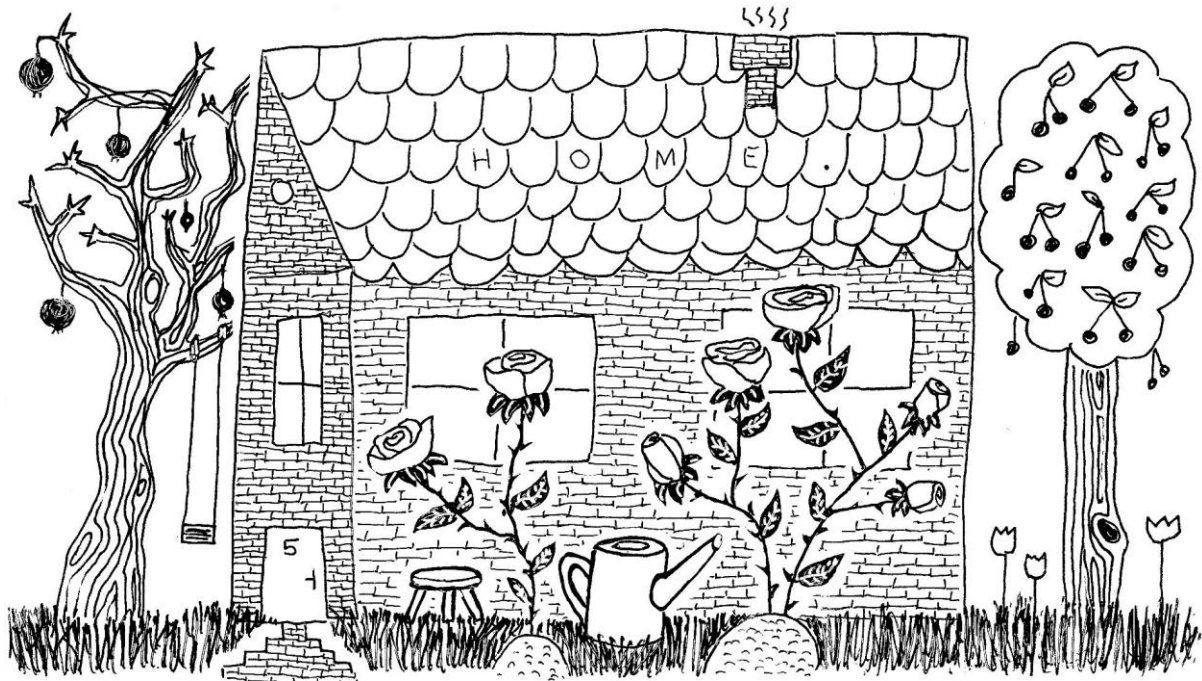
So, Yugonostalgia can basically present a political program which builds on the values of socialism as the ideology of radical equality based on the ideals of modernity, the Enlightenment and multiculturalism ([Markovina 2015](#)). This value, exactly, wants to be recreated by the new post-Yugoslav left ([Štikš 2015](#)) or, as some would put it, “partisan left” ([Kirn 2022](#)). The rise of the left-wing movements throughout the (post)Yugoslav space and their enhanced cooperation is embedded in investigative reflection into how “it was once” to establish the new political ideas for how it “can be once again”. But the most important thing is that remembering Yugoslavia can revoke the idea of bringing progress and hope back into the political field of (post)Yugoslavia. In a time where right-wing and centre political choices remain embedded in the concepts of nation-states and ethno-national vision of the world, the new left-wing positionalities turn to internationalist Yugoslav reflections. And in the time of dystopia, it can bring us revoking faith in the utopian rethinking of a better world ([2019](#)). So, it is not possible to distinguish home from the heart. But it is important to know where the heart is and to listen to it very carefully.

Suitcase carriers

Authors

Giulia Loda is an aspiring social researcher, collaborating with Codici and exploring topics such as migration, memory, activism, and community storytelling.

Lorenzo Scalchi is a social researcher at Codici who studies various topics, including international migrations, memories, and social inequalities.



«Even though we had moved into a house that was too small, I felt like I was in an environment that reminded me of my home in Serbia. There was a courtyard shared with other families. They were farmers. We often met, and we talked. Those people were very welcoming to us. But to have a residence permit we had to live in a house that met the criteria for housing suitability. That house, because of its interior, did not meet them. But for me, the most important 'room' is precisely that courtyard. There, I met the neighbors and shared with them the day, the things of everyday life. They asked about me, about my life...»

How can you recreate a home away from home? Every possible answer reflects the extraordinary diversity of the stories of those who move from one house to another or from one country to another, of those who experience uprooting or new rooting. And yet, contrary to the widespread belief that to feel good in a new context it is necessary to invest almost exclusively in the interior of one's home – cleaning it, furnishing it to one's liking, personalizing its spaces, filling it with objects or habits from one's tradition – the people interviewed as part of *Moj Dom* tell us something else: the most decisive elements for feeling at home again are meeting new people and sharing experiences and stories with them. This sharing can give rise to positive relationships that one can count on and for which one becomes important. The ways, spaces, and times of this process depend on many factors at play. This is not to say that the private dimension is useless, quite the opposite. Material things – some spaces, some objects – nurture new relationships and senses of belonging, facilitating the sharing of intimate stories and emotions, which would be difficult to verbalize, especially after the experience of difficult, if not traumatic, events.

The answers to the interviews conducted by Codici and the stories collected during the collection days (participatory research moments through the collection of memories and personal objects directly from the communities or people involved), organized with the association *Lapsus*, indicate that it is possible to rediscover a sense of belonging even after a dramatic experience, such as displacement, uprooting or war. The specific aspect that we want to highlight is that a fundamental help in building new

relationships of sharing and reciprocity can be given by the most private and intimate aspects of one's history.

In this contribution, we will discuss how memories of the past can help rebuild a sense of home, allowing an emotional bond with the past and making the new environment capable of including the different aspects of identity. To understand how memories facilitate new important relationships, it is necessary to formulate some guiding questions. How is a new sense of home built thanks to memories? How can these give life to new interpersonal or community relationships? What is the role of material objects in this process? How do new social bonds contribute to strengthening memory and bringing positive emotions back to the surface?

Memories

The previous article suggests the centrality of nostalgia, which, in the process of loss and recreation of one's home, can help to find a balance by allowing a reappropriation of a past that has detached itself too quickly. This aspect is present in many of the stories heard, even if people often follow complex paths to recognize it.

«I would like to spend some time there [in Požarevac, Serbia] and then come back here to Italy. When I'm there, there is a strong energy that I absorb from that place and that's why I want to go back often. If I go there, I recharge my batteries for I don't know how long. This thing happens often, but when I retire I would like to take the time to stay there longer. By now I have put down roots here and as the roots sink you can't detach yourself from here.

It's often the smells that make me remember the past, the smells of my grandmother's scarves in the closet. But it's also the people, the friends. It seems like a different, cleaner air. It's strange... even the trees that are still there and the roses that my mother planted.»

The houses of the past are material buildings that can no longer accommodate lives. However, they do not stop being bearers of memories. The return to the place, and the object of the house, if relived and retold, allows us to keep alive some dimensions of ourselves that are essential for our identity in the present, which would otherwise risk being lost. These houses, compared to the ones of the present, are places of refreshment and recharging. They are sources of emotional nourishment.

To these stories, others are added, in which the story focuses not so much on reliving memories, but on a process of reconciliation or reconciliation with one's origins. Many people born in Italy or who arrived when they were very young get closer to their culture of origin in a very complex way.

«First, there is the culture at home, which makes you feel part of something and makes you remember your roots. Then, in a country other than your country of origin, there is an uprooting and a sense of inferiority that leads you to detach yourself from that home culture. You want to become like the others. In my case, like Italian children. There is a path of rejection. When these two cultures are so much in conflict then you try to get back on a single track because you feel that by returning there is a community that makes you remember, in this sense, the reappropriation is a relief. Until I was 18 I didn't want to know about it. I was ashamed of my mother tongue and I didn't express my origins to the outside world. Then, little by little, I began to love them again calmly by coming into contact with people from the community. I began to feel love towards myself. I wanted to forgive myself and I understood that that hatred was not my fault.»

Becoming aware of the need for reconciliation with one's culture of origin, and rediscovering and re-evaluating one's roots, is an outcome that takes time. However, it is an important starting point to feel good even in a new life context. It requires placing the reconstruction of the self at the center of the process.

Objects

During the interviews, people talked about their homes starting from the stories of their favorite rooms and objects. Surprisingly, the answers were very similar: the living room (or dining room) and the courtyard (or garden) were the most mentioned places. The reasons are linked to the fact that they are spaces large enough to bring together members of a family and easily accessible to outsiders. They are also the environments where the beauty of one's stories is shown, thanks to the mesmerizing objects on display in the living room or the flowers and plants in the garden. The anthropologist [Daniel Miller](#) (2008) wrote that the objects in our homes represent a manifestation

of ourselves and our relationships with the outside. Far from being simple symbols of consumerism or private isolation, they acquire value for their role in building and maintaining social, family, and interpersonal relationships.

Objects related to the home are much more than simple memories: they are symbols that help keep intact the links with our past and build our present. The analysis of the stories heard leads to consider four main ways in which an object creates a bridge between past and present, between physical place and places of memory.

Belonging

The object becomes a symbol of belonging, be it to a family, a religious faith, or one's country of origin. Let us take religious icons as an example, often cited by some people of Serbian origin interviewed. They recall spirituality or belonging to a belief, but they also affirm the existence and unity of a family divided by distance. Carrying that symbol with you allows you to recreate a familiar and spiritual environment wherever you are, keeping the bonds with your home and community alive.

Protection and security
Other objects evoke protection and security because the home is also a safe refuge against external dangers. There are recurring objects – similar to the concept of transitional objects ([van der Kolk 2015](#)) – that recall the time of war: a time that still scares and leads to the need for protection. A teddy bear is an example of that sense of protection that people who were children in the 1990s remember having brought in their suitcases. The teddy bear becomes the guardian of the self, it protects from fears and insecurities.

Care

The home is often the result of practices of care of the space and of the people and some objects effectively synthesize concepts such as care and solidarity. The theme of care is, moreover, very central for all the people who welcomed people fleeing wars during the 1990s, even in Italy. Some of the objects most present in their stories are, for example, the games they had when they were children (often it was the youngest who were periodically hosted by Italian families). They bring to mind strong relationships, established between Bosnian children and Italian children. Similarly, the memory of a lemonade offered as soon as they arrived in the host home is emblematic, as an act that refers to a sense of welcome and attention that is remembered even 30 years later. Then, some objects symbolize the ability to get back on one's feet, to repair wounds within the family context, even when external acceptance has been lacking. They could be the pine cones that the mother of a Sicilian girl, Ena, painted in silver and sold as Christmas decorations to new fellow countrymen in Sicily. The money from that craft was used to support the family's expenses.

Reintegration or reconciliation of the self

Finally, objects facilitate the union of parts of the self that risk being dispersed due to geographical or temporal distance. Photo albums, records, and music cassettes of the time were cited or shown by several of the people met, intending to affirm the importance of recovering fragments of a past life, functioning as anchors of memory that keep the pieces of the self together.

An object alone does not necessarily facilitate the production of a new sense of home. It can happen if there are people to do it with. According to [Paolo Jedlowski](#) (2009), an experience (i.e. a reworked memory) also takes on value in itself when it can be narrated and is narrated to an audience. Narration allows the telling of a story to take on a different form for the audience to which it is addressed and this also allows experimenting with different ways to tell the same fact. Therefore, the sense of displacement felt by those who have recovered from traumatic experiences can be perpetuated over time not only due to the lack of words to tell but also due to the lack of people able to listen.

Consequently, the deep bond that people have with objects becomes a useful means: they make the story accessible and tangible, encouraging the active participation of the people in the audience. Objects become builders of relationships and forms of identification with the stories of others. An example comes from the stories of those Italians who organized forms of hospitality in the 1990s: those who open the doors of their home also experience a transformation. The home they once knew will no longer be the same: it is enriched by new relationships and contact with different cultures.

The sharing of objects and stories enriches our experience and amplifies their meaning, creating bonds. This process promotes self-integration and personal growth, extending from the individual level to the family level and larger communities. For those who emigrated to Italy, the concept of narrative community extends especially beyond blood ties. People have talked about the importance of telling their stories in new relationships created through a mutual sharing of memories (and objects). These are elective communities (for example the community of compatriots), but above all they reflect bonds that are created even casually in everyday routines (for example through chatter in the workplace) and that become disinterested reciprocity.

«When you avoid telling someone that you are Bosnian [...] you start to lose your identity, you don't know what you belong to. A sense of belonging to something must be there, in the sense that you must be useful to the part of society you are part of. [...] For example, since I was 18 I have been on the board of the Pro Loco of my village and maybe I have brought in both Italian and Bosnian kids.»

Interviews with members of organizations and communities that welcomed people who emigrated from the former Yugoslavia during the wars highlight the importance of having a community that listens to and shares each person's stories. This process makes the community stronger, as happened for the Vicenza community around the [Insieme per Sarajevo association](#), but also for the community of Valsassina, where solidarity and hospitality are the fundamental values around which people still recognize themselves today. The fact of hosting at home created positive memories that led to long-lasting relationships and deep interpersonal relations, key elements for building communities and producing collective narratives. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the approach to welcoming was based on the creation of community bonds between those who welcomed and those who were welcomed: those who responded to immediate needs – such as food, clothing, and a place to sleep – also had to respond to social needs. The heterogeneity of experiences, not only in family hospitality but also in other intervention contexts, was fundamental, making the experience similar to a vacation and allowing the possibility of change in the long term. On the contrary, in several interviews, the problem of not remembering emerged: it is that of not wanting to remember, but also that of not being able to remember. You don't say anything when there is too much suffering. Or when you have no holds and memories can be lost.

«I believe that very few have managed to recover everything that was in the houses. When my wife entered for the first time, immediately after the war, she was brave. She found nothing. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Only later did we recover some photo albums, and a few books, but the rest disappeared. This – I also reworked it in one or two stories I wrote – means that there was a tendency of those who hated to strike deep, throwing away people's photo albums. Today you can find various online forums where people rightly complain about being left without photos from that past. It seems like nothing, but if you have a photo it feels like you are somehow recovering a part of your life. [...] Therefore, I say, art remains, and so do films, literature, and theater. They remain as a means to enter the so-called cracks in the facades that seem smooth. [...] Well, I believe that people fleeing other conflicts can certainly testify to this in a very, very similar way.»

Conclusion

Through sharing and mutual support, and the provision of common spaces and tools, such as photographs, even those who have difficulty remembering or narrating can contribute and benefit from a narrative community.

If feeling at home comes from sharing and mutual understanding of experiences, it may happen that a new definition of 'home' is born, where identity and a sense of security are redefined together. Thus, reconstruction is not only about overcoming the past but also about creating a new future. For this reason, in the collected stories there is no sense of home described with words like 'ethnicity', 'nation', or 'religion'. Furthermore, the new home is less and less rooted in a single place and is created from the experiences of others, ubiquitously. As if the home were a suitcase.

Giulia Loda is an aspiring social researcher, collaborating with Codici and exploring topics such as migration, memory, activism, and community storytelling.

Lorenzo Scalchi is a social researcher at Codici who studies various topics, including international migrations, memories, and social inequalities.

recognize themselves in a particular community etc. Most of the people who may be interested in a collection day do not perceive themselves as “official” witnesses (Wieviorka 2006) since the collection aims precisely to collect further stories in addition to those already collected, “beyond” what has already been mapped. To do so, it seeks to include the most significant number of people who probably have never thought of having something unique to say about that event. This is why communication must be well planned, to make people perceive that each story can contribute to the general plot of facts and historical reconstructions. In the field of oral history, each voice is a witness. The awareness that every personal experience contributes to the historical construct implies a democratization not only of sources and witnesses (which is no longer reduced to a few “official” voices) but also a democratization of history itself, which becomes common to all, created by the – small or large – actions of each. For this reason, collection days have increasingly become a handy tool for those who practice historical research also through the collection of oral sources and the analysis of community memories that until that moment have been excluded from the official story, from History with a capital H, for ethnic reasons, economic marginalization, gender, religion and so on.

Healing through sharing

Collection day is a powerful tool for exploring traumatic memories. It offers a supportive environment for individuals to share and digitize personal artefacts connected to their experiences. Sharing photos, objects, and testimonies that hold deep emotional significance helps people reflect on and express their traumatic memories. In addition to individual healing, collection days contribute to creating collective memory. By digitizing and archiving personal items, this participatory approach helps preserve personal histories, enabling future generations to access and study them. Moreover, the educational value of these artefacts fosters historical awareness and empathy, particularly among younger generations, who gain a better understanding of trauma and its long-lasting effects.

Notes and portraits from the Moj Dom collection days

The collections organised by Lapsus in the course of different projects follow a similar course structure. However, they always generate different results, depending on the various responses that a community or group of people give—or do not give—to the researchers’ request. The first phase always concerns the identification of a place in which to carry out the collection, which can have both the technical and symbolic characteristics to host the initiative. Therefore, the choice of location is always delicate and conditioned by the context. During the Moj Dom collection days, realized between September 2023 and January 2024 and organized together with Codici, in some contexts (Piacenza and Verona), a place that was very connected with the community invited to the collection was chosen. A third neutral location was chosen in others (such as Milan and Vicenza).

Together with the place, thoughts are generated on the forms of information, communication and engagement of the people to be included. Suppose reference is made to a specific, cohesive community in dialogue. In that case, the choice falls to identifying active persons within the group who can facilitate the dissemination of the message and generate the context of trust necessary for people to choose to participate. This person or group may be a member of a specific association working with the community, a religious representative, a cultural mediator, or a person at the centre of network relationships related to the collection theme. In some cases, as in Vicenza, even a venue such as a restaurant serving Serbian cuisine can become a place to spread the word about the planned activity and invite different community members to participate.

The actual process of gathering witnesses and sources is relatively straightforward and follows a simple structure. On arrival at the location, the participant meets a person from the research team designated to make him or her feel at ease, primarily giving all the information about the event and the future of the material collected. The collection process is centred on a gift mechanism: communities donate their time, individuals donate trust, witnesses donate a fragment of their story, and those who have carefully preserved an object donate its image and classification within an archive whose mechanisms may be highly obscure to the uninitiated. It is, therefore, essential to establish from the outset an environment in which the recognition of the gift that people make to the research group is clear and in which the

valorisation of the effort of the individual who chooses to participate and the valorisation of the story and the donated object is evident.

After the reception, each person is invited to an interview dialogue with an individual researcher, who, after answering any doubts and having the privacy documents signed, will interview the object's history and, through it, of the participating person. The researchers mark the information in a standard form, in which the recognition metadata is included in addition to the history. Each story is catalogued with an alphanumeric code associated with the collected object. After the interview, which can vary from a few minutes to an hour, depending on the details included and the emotional load it carries, the person is accompanied by another researcher, who scans or photographs the object with an alphanumeric code.

Video documentation

For Moj Dom, it was decided to make video portraits of the participants, in which, in addition to the object, the participant's face and voice were also collected, involving a professional photographer, Marco Carmignan. The photographer asked them to repeat in front of the camera why they had chosen that object to symbolize their story. Although the camera might have intimidated some people, most agreed to be portrayed – often involved in the image of the person (partner, relative or friend) who had accompanied them that day. Here is another typical feature of collections: people often participate accompanied by someone who comes to the event as an emotional support or a companion, but after a while, this person also finds himself emotionally involved in donating memory. It is, therefore, not unusual to see people in collections who initially announce themselves as only companions («I have nothing interesting to tell; he/she will tell you something interesting»). Then, after seeing how the activity works, they ask to give an interview, looking in their pockets for an object that can act as a donation or recalling it and describing it to the researchers. For this reason, it is not unusual to find the wording «did not bring an object but wanted to give the interview» in the metadata sheets of Moj Dom collections. Even if this “undermines” the objectives of the collection, this is always encouraged when it is proposed because it becomes clear that the object has a purely projective value and triggers memories but that the centre of the collection remains the experience expressed by the words of the participants.

It is important to always remember that interviewees may feel anxious about meeting the researcher's expectations at the beginning of each interview. Addressing this anxiety early on, during the initial intake process, is crucial to enabling people to share what is important to them in response to the question rather than trying to guess what the researcher might want to hear.

Young people's involvement in Piacenza

The collection organized in Piacenza saw the participation of very young people, from adolescents of 14 years old up to young people of 25 or 26. The young people, born in Italy or migrated in the very early years of life, all shared the common Bosnian origin of their families, many natives of Prijedor. All of them are protagonists of the life of the cultural and religious centre that hosted the collection, where they decided to give life to a youth association that could provide a sense of community and participation to young people who, like them, live in Italy but with Bosnian origins. What can commonly be defined in mainstream language as a second generation, on that occasion, intervened as a first and particular new generation. It led to telling events experienced by their parents and grandparents, presenting their own stories, requests, problems and passions, including the rediscovery of religious faith as an element of community and meeting among peers.

Deepening community bonds in Verona

The one in Verona, which took place in the Bosnian Islamic Community's hall of worship, was characterized as an intimate community moment, in which the interviews took longer because the interviewees showed a need for a story that went beyond the events and touched on a self-reflection on themselves, as individuals and as a community.

Contrasts Between Milan and Vicenza Events

Another interesting comparison is between the collection day organized in Milan and Vicenza. Both were organized during the winter period; the first tried to include a national community, but also activity and experience in the reception and aid humanitarian sector structured in northern Italy in the 90s in civil society in response to the wars in the former Yugoslavia, launching a call in a large city. To do so, a neutral space was chosen, and the support of a virtual community was gathered around a social page

with socio-political updates on the Balkans. The context proved highly challenging, attracting a minimal number of people. In Vicenza, however, the different communities and individuals, including single people born in the former Yugoslavia, people and families belonging to the various Serbian communities active in the territory, and families and single people who lived in the Vicenza area in the 1990s, were part of organized groups and civil society organizations. These groups collected funds and aid for the Yugoslav territories affected by the conflict. At the same time, they provided long-term shelter for minors and children who were victims of the conflict. The engagement took place through some people active in both communities, who directly contacted their networks, spread the information and took the opportunity to call groups of people who had had a close relationship in the past and who had lost sight of each other over the years, to use the event as a moment of reunion and sociality. The event, organized in a third (or neutral) space, was well attended because it was an opportunity for meeting, exchange and sociality. At the time of the collection, a documentary linked to the project followed, and a dinner of Serbian food was organized specifically for the occasion. Around the tables with food, researchers, photographers, witnesses, displaced people, and host families found themselves in a new free form, no longer in the "role" given by the research event but of the human connection of stories, histories, opinions, and choices. These quick examples hopefully can serve to create an idea of the different variants that a collection day can unfold. Even if organized within a few months and focusing on the same research theme, these examples demonstrate different variants that can arise using the same methodologies. Just like fieldwork in social and historical research, especially when it involves individuals and communities sharing their stories, the collection of oral sources must be adaptable to include and encourage active listening from all participants.

Curating and preserving personal histories

Laboratorio Lapsus and Codici have successfully utilized these initiatives to categorize and analyze collected items, creating an exhibition that preserves and recognises these valuable personal and collective histories. Following the collection phase, Laboratorio Lapsus took the time to analyze the items gathered. Utilizing a process of clustering by keywords, they meticulously curated the items to create an exhibition that would truly captivate and engage the audience.

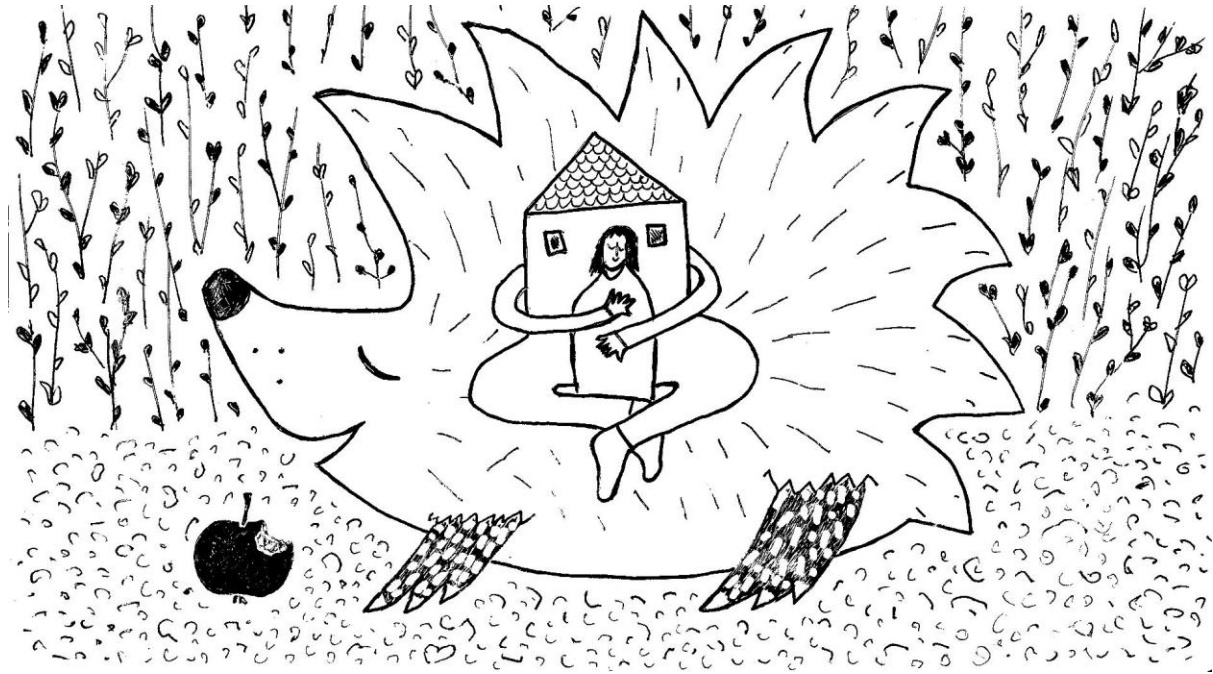
This work ensures that the emotional and historical narratives associated with these memories are accessible for future research and reflection, emphasizing their ongoing relevance.

Home is where I am my true self

Authors:

Anja Gvozdanić, PhD, is a sociologist and youth researcher who works at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb on topics of youth political culture and social capital.

Emina Bužinkić, PhD, is a researcher, activist, and writer at the intersections of migration, refuge, education, transnational solidarities, and feminist praxis.



Youth's perspectives on the concept of home

«No matter what kind of home I have got,
I cherish it and love it a lot.
It is simple and modest, but it's mine,
Here I am free, and I like it just fine.»

Branko Ćopić, [The Hedgehog's Home](#)

Just like previous generations, the children's story called *Ježeva kućica* (The Hedgehog's Home) by Branko Ćopić is well known to young people today in Croatia, as well as in other countries of the former Yugoslavia. The story concerns Ježurka's deep attachment and pride in his modest but cosy home. Throughout the tale, forest animals – a wolf, a wild boar and a bear mock Ježurka for his modest house and question why he cherishes it so much. Ježurka always returns to and stands in protection of his humble home, explaining that his happiness and contentment come from having a place he can call his own and where he feels free, safe and comfortable. The story's moral is that any and every home should be protected and taken care of because it provides a sense of safety and freedom. First published in 1949, this children's story represents the archetype of a home adopted for generations, often more unconsciously than consciously. This story forms a cultural backdrop because, for many of us in the post-Yugoslav region, Ježurka Ježić was and probably still is the first meaningful encounter with the concept and sense of home.

The goal of this text is not to convey an analysis of Ćopić's widely known children's story but to sketch a contemporary understanding of home amongst young people in Croatia. Modern Croatian society has become more complex than when Branko Ćopić wrote *The Hedgehog's Home*. In this sense, how do young people today understand, experience, think and speak of home? How do they define it, what

constitutes a home in their everyday lives and what determines it? Under the framework of the Moj Dom project, we sought to answer these questions through qualitative research conducted in four focus groups across Zagreb, Vukovar, and Osijek. A total of 30 young people participated in the study in December 2023. Two focus groups included students from the University of Zagreb, while the other two included students in the final grades of secondary schools in Vukovar and Osijek. The latter focus groups were organized in collaboration with the Nansen Dialogue Center Osijek, Udruga žena Vukovar /Women's Association Vukovar, and two teachers, Đurđica and Mirjana, who have been a part of the Nansen Dialogue Centre's teachers community.

We started from the assumption that home is a concept, construct and an affection not limited to a house, space, and place. It appears in its various and fluid meanings. The variety of meanings of home implies that it comprises geographical, residential and sensory features as well as those that we cannot see, hear, feel, smell or touch. Home is also an undefined feeling of authenticity and emancipation, belonging and an act of choice. The fluid meaning of home implies a changeable life perspective and adaptation to new life situations that come naturally with one's upbringing and the experience of growing up but are also shaped by significant events that are usually beyond our control, such as forcible uprooting.

One of the prominent themes that emerged during focus group discussion, which is individualistic in nature, was the perception of home as a place of authenticity, or as some authors describe it—a place where our existence does not need justification ([Boccagni and Kusenbach 2020](#)). Indeed, the very strong meaning our participants attached to the home is the feeling of (personal) freedom (just like Ježurka Ježić!). A participant said that home is, first, a sense of freedom, a prerequisite for achieving togetherness and solidarity in a community or society. Before connecting with other people, one should be independent and emancipated, and one's home enables that. Home, as some participants said, allows one to have the autonomy to fulfil his needs and desires, e.g. purchasing and using items that cater to his preferences. This ability to create and control one's environment enables a sense of personal freedom and self-sufficiency that home embodies. Home is not just a physical space but also an emotional and psychological haven in one's control. In this sense, this primarily individualistic perspective of understanding home sees home as belonging to oneself and preserving one's privacy, from which strength is drawn to connect with others outside one's home. A space where you are "your true self" and where all the "social masks that we put on for the public are removed when we leave home", as one participant said. Home, paraphrasing the famous sociologist Goffman, is the backstage of life (Boccagni and Kusenbach, 2020) in which there is no need to act or perform.

As one participant aptly put it, «Home is where I am on autopilot.» The same participant continued by saying that home makes her sensory blades dull, and all the inner antennas for being alert are unconsciously turned off. This unconscious ease suggests that the home operates as a background or "power supply system", maintaining our existence much like our breath sustains us without conscious thought. Within the home, there is an inherent unawareness of space, an effortless sense of surrender, and a profound feeling of normality – a space where the surroundings blend into the background, allowing one to exist without heightened awareness or vigilance. One participant interestingly drew a parallel with travelling abroad, saying how the contrast between familiar and unfamiliar environments can bring our cultural norms and comforts into sharper focus. We often remain oblivious to the nuances of our own culture until we are exposed to the unfamiliar, which forces us to reflect on what we take for granted. In a similar way, the meaning of home becomes most apparent when we are distanced from it.

The concept of home often evokes images of comfort, safety, and warmth, and these positive and neutral associations are commonly discussed. However, it is important to acknowledge that home can also hold and embody negative feelings and experiences such as insecurity, instability, fear, and oppression. In group discussions, people tend to focus on the home's positive attributes, possibly due to the inclination to provide socially acceptable answers and the reluctance to share negative experiences. Despite this, it is crucial to recognize that for some, home is far from being a safe haven.

Instead, it represents a place of constraint, where freedom and authenticity are compromised due to various factors such as domestic violence, socio-economic challenges, etc.

Secondly, participants expressed meanings and experiences of home that can be called collectivistic. Meanings of the home were mostly found in family and friendship ties that were seen as a refuge from the hostile and unsupportive outer world, family rituals and socializing, as well as in rootedness and belonging to a place and community. In addition, the idea was that location becomes a home when people with whom one shares a deep connection inhabit it. It is the presence and bond with these people, significant others, which transform a mere place into a meaningful home. In this sense, the physical surroundings become secondary to the relationships that define the experience of home. For many, the emotional and psychological aspects of home—feelings of warmth, acceptance, and love—are more significant than the actual physical space. Thus, the perspective that a person can become a home to someone else was discussed. The idea was that one could provide a sense of stability and comfort that transcends place boundaries. In addition, there was a step beyond conventional framework when talking about home: a home was understood as a choice in terms of finding one's own "tribe" or "a chosen family" usually, but not exclusively, through digital technology. Technology today allows young people to reach out to many people they personally do not know but with whom they share values that are important to them, values that may not be recognized or supported by people in their immediate surroundings. In this way, a home is created virtually in the digital world, and it can feel very real. Having their own "tribe," whether virtual or in real life, allows young people to experience a sense of belonging. Belonging as a feeling is often associated with family, relatives, friends, like-minded individuals, and community and is considered a crucial aspect of the meaning of home. From the perspective of young people, belonging is the feeling of being accepted and respected for who they truly are. According to some participants, they experience a sense of belonging when they feel that their authentic self is valued and acknowledged by significant others. Belonging is not complete if the acceptance is one-sided. For example, it is not enough for a person to be declaratively part of a group; true belonging requires that the group fully accept that person as they are. In this sense, the meaning of home is essentially relational, characterized by mutually accepting feelings, appreciation, and support. Our participants engaged in lively talks, exploring numerous issues. We appreciate their valuable time and contribution to the research. Our small-scale qualitative research consistently indicated that one of the fundamental essences of a home is a sense of freedom to express one's authentic identity and to be free from judgement, much as Ježurka cherishes his freedom and safety in his home.

Home is the present when you don't have to fear for the past

Author:

Heike Karge is a Southeast European history and anthropology professor at the University of Graz, Austria. She focuses on the cultural and social history of Southeast Europe, particularly the culture of remembrance and the history of psychiatry.



My students at the University of Regensburg and the University of Graz are predominantly located at home in the present. This is not surprising, as these 20-30-year-olds are building a home that is characterized by the completed separation from the parental home, stable friendships or partnerships, and the first children, thus the establishment of their own home.

What role does the past play for other people, in other generations and in other spaces? To explore this and other related questions, I travelled to Lika in Croatia in May 2024, a region where the memory of the past is a fiercely contested commodity. We were interested in the role of memory in a space that was, for a long time, an ethnically mixed space due to historical causes and where violence eventually erupted inter-ethnically. We were also interested in how former perpetrators of one war or another and former victims of one war or another live together or lived together for a long time in this space and how this situation is dealt with in terms of the culture and politics of remembrance. Finally, we wanted to explore how memory functions in a space that has ultimately become an ethnically largely segregated space as a result of forced migration and escape. Is the idea of home in this space necessarily a different one, namely one that is shaped not by the present but by the past?

In the following, I will first briefly introduce Lika as a historical region. I will then describe one of the places we visited – the bay of Slana – and the discussion that arose for us on the above questions. The perspective taken in this essay is mine and that of my students, none of whom are native to this space and none of whom were born in Lika. But in the course of the excursion, we all developed a specific idea of what it means for people who are or were at home in this region to (not) remember war crimes that took place here.

Lika is an area which, due to its historical specificity – the establishment of the Habsburg military border – became a very special landscape in Croatia in an ethnic sense, namely one in which there was a very large influx of Orthodox Slavs, later called Serbs. In the past, an ethnically mixed region emerged here – populated by Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs – who, equally attracted by the advantages

promised by the military border (for example, the personal freedom of farmers), settled here. With the dissolution of the military border at the end of the 19th century, however, a process began in Lika that can most succinctly be described as depopulation. Apart from a few episodes, the entire 20th century was characterized by this process. The strongest migratory movements were recorded during the Second World War and what is now known in Croatia as the Homeland War (1991-1995). In the former, Lika lost almost a quarter of its population, and in the latter, over 40 per cent. Both wars, and even more so the latter, were also waged as ethnic wars. During the Second World War, the Croatian Ustashe installed a racist and nationalist regime of terror in the fascist independent state of Croatia, which was primarily directed against Serbs, Jews, Roma and political dissidents. At the beginning of the Homeland War, the internationally unrecognized Republika Srpska Krajina (RSK) was proclaimed, which also included the eastern territory of Lika. At the beginning of this war, Croatian Serbs expelled and murdered the Croats living here in Lika. The conflict was then frozen, and international troops under a United Nations mandate guarded the unwilling peace, interrupted by war crimes on both sides, until finally, in 1995, in the course of the military operation Oluja, there was a mass exodus and expulsion of Croatian Serbs from Lika. Only a few returned afterwards.

In other words, we are dealing with different and changing groups of perpetrators and victims in one and the same territory over a period of around 50 years – which must essentially and alternately be called Croatian and Serbian. It should also be noted that we are dealing with a historically evolved, once ethnically mixed border area, the former military border, which at the end of the 20th century became an ethnically largely segregated border area – and thus also an ethnically largely segregated area of remembrance.

So here lies the problem of remembrance culture and remembrance policy: who should, may and can remember how and what? What happens when former perpetrators of one war or another and former victims of one war or another live together or have lived together for a long time? How does remembrance work in an ethnically segregated space and what does this mean for the feeling and experience of home?

One of the places we visit is the bay of Slana on the island of Pag. There is no more vegetation on this part of the island, only karst rock. The May sun burns mercilessly on the stone and on us as we walk past tourists sunbathing on the rocks in a bay not far away. We read on the Internet (beach-searcher.de/) that Slana beach is ranked 49th out of 70 beaches in the Lika-Senj region. It is praised in particular for the amenities that the seclusion of this place brings for bathers. What the website does not reveal is that the bay of Slana is not only a picturesque, secluded spot on a Croatian Adriatic island but was also the site of an Ustasha concentration camp during the Second World War, where thousands of Serbs and Jews were murdered. To commemorate the victims of this place, the local veterans' association erected a small memorial plaque in Slana Bay, below the former extermination camp, in 1975. It was just a small sign, but one that enabled the bereaved families of the victims to remember their relatives who had been murdered here. A place that, despite all the pain, made it possible to put down roots because it made wounds visible – not with the aim of keeping them open, but to offer healing. When a new war broke out in Lika at the beginning of the 1990s, the memorial plaque was quickly destroyed. New memorial plaques were erected twice more, in 2010 and 2013, but these were destroyed by local residents within a few days.

We look at the completely unmarked remains of a building of the former camp. We look at the nearby, recently erected Orthodox cross. What does it mean, I ask the students, when victims of one war (Serbs in the Second World War) become perpetrators in another war (in the course of the establishment of the RSK)? What should happen to the memories of the victims? Who may, who must (no longer) remember what?

We remain silent for a long time. Answers to this question are not easy. One student says that remembering victims is always important, regardless of whether members of this group became perpetrators in another war. It has, she says, something to do with home, with a feeling of being at home: I am at home where I can be free, where I don't have to be afraid. And finally, she adds: in particular, I don't have to be afraid that my present or, yes, even my past will be taken away from me.

Because where signs of remembrance are destroyed, an attempt is made to take away pasts, to rewrite or erase the past, and therefore also to de-home people.

So what might home be for the people who keep destroying memorials in the bay of Slana? Does their image of home go hand in hand with the certainty that the perpetrators of one war could not possibly have been the victims of another? Or with the conviction that perpetration in one war cancels out victimhood in another war, but only in relation to members of the other ethnic group? Or even with the conviction that perpetration by people of one's own ethnic group need not (or no longer) be mentioned at all?

Therefore, what, on the other hand, might be home for the people who set up memorials again and again in the bay of Slana and again and again see them destroyed? Who remembers the victims of one war, even though people of the same ethnic group became perpetrators in another war? Who cannot or do not want to forget that they were once at home here? We have read that Lika is one of the regions in Croatia with the highest rate of returnees. And yet the number and, in particular, the composition of the returnees suggest that the Lika homeland will soon come to an end for the Serbs who once lived here or have returned, along with the ever-destroyed signs of remembrance. It is mainly the old people who have returned. The young either stayed elsewhere, migrated further towards Western Europe, or, if they once lived here, have now also left. For all young people, the weak economic situation in Lika is likely to be the main reason for leaving or not returning. Lika has been a structurally weak region with little potential for economic growth throughout the 20th century, but even more so as a result of the last war. The fact that the signs of remembrance, the symbolic signs through which a group assures itself of its common past, have also disappeared is likely only to encourage this development.

Due to the contested past, the feeling of home in Lika encompasses both temporal dimensions: the present as well as the past. Only where the past is not contested can the feeling of home very well and very pleasurably extend purely to the present. Home can be the present where there is no need to fear for the past. And perhaps it is more the case that both temporal dimensions are always there, just not equally present. One thing seems certain: if the past is contested, it pushes itself much more visibly into what we imagine as home in Lika. As students and lecturers at the University of Graz, we have come to the conclusion after this journey that home is where both times – the present and the past – do not necessarily have to find a space but can very well do so.

How to write an educational resource

Authors:

Laboratorio Lapsus Public history association, does history in an inclusive and participatory way through research, teaching, outreach and cultural projects. engages audiences of all ages, interests and skills by promoting a laboratory, collaborative and transparent approach. It envisions a society where, through historical knowledge and the acquisition of critical tools, every person can understand the complexity of the present.



Laboratorio Lapsus has developed its approach from extensive experience in educational settings, working closely with middle and high school students through hands-on activities. The core of its work involves creating historical learning pathways that address contemporary issues, which has helped to understand the interests and concerns of young people and their teachers. One of the key discussions within Laboratorio Lapsus revolves around the use of school textbooks. While textbooks are traditionally seen as the primary tool for teaching history, there is a growing consensus among educators that effective history education should go beyond mere memorization. Instead, it should equip students with the tools to analyze and understand the past and its connections to the present, helping them identify logical connections, causes, and consequences and develop critical thinking and analytical skills. To achieve this, Laboratorio Lapsus advocates for using historical sources in teaching. Working with primary sources, such as oral testimonies, archival documents, multimedia objects, and visual materials, allows students to engage directly with historical evidence. This approach helps students to develop skills in document analysis, critical thinking, and interpretation, which are essential in an era of information overload where discerning truth from misinformation is increasingly important.

This article proposes the use of educational kits – and specifically Moj Dom edukit -designed around specific themes and built on a collection of diverse sources. The Moj Dom edukit guides students through the process of analyzing, constructing, and deconstructing historical narratives, with the support of educational questions that prompt discussion and critical reflection. It also includes additional resources for further research, such as bibliographies, filmography and other resources. The kit is accompanied by a historical introduction to guide and give context for key events and topics. It is designed for both in-person and remote teaching, with user-friendly formats that are accessible to students with reading difficulties.

Laboratorio Lapsus recognizes the challenges teachers face, including limited time and heavy workloads. The educational kit is intended to offer a practical alternative to traditional lecture-based teaching methods, promoting active student engagement with historical sources. This hands-on approach helps develop the analytical and critical thinking skills that are crucial for understanding both the past and its relevance to the present.

Why this kit in Moj Dom project

This educational kit was created by Laboratorio Lapsus and colleagues from Documenta. The aim is raising awareness about the war in the former Yugoslavia, primarily using the memories of those who directly experienced it first-hand. It is a multilingual digital resource suitable for teaching both history and civic education.

The partners of the Moj Dom project created this edukit because they believe that addressing and understanding the wars of the 1990s in Yugoslavia is not merely an academic exercise for younger generations but a necessary step to grasp complex historical, social, and political processes, promote inclusive identities, and ensure a better understanding of the importance of peace and coexistence. By learning from past conflicts and engaging in comprehensive memory work, younger generations can build a future where diversity is celebrated and mutual understanding prevails. Laboratorio Lapsus draws on its own experience with oral history and interviews collected for the creation of its kits. This is a powerful tool in educational contexts, especially when dealing with traumatic memories such as wars, genocides, or natural disasters. Historical events are no longer mere dates or facts but stories lived by real people. This approach can facilitate empathy and deep understanding, stimulating critical reflections in students on issues of memory, identity and social justice. Moreover, this approach can help bring out the stories and experiences often neglected in traditional historical accounts and textbooks, thus contributing to a more inclusive and diverse view of history. The Moj Dom edukit is, in fact, the result of 75 interviews with people coming from Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovenia, and Croatia who were either people who emigrated in the context of Yugoslav wars or volunteers operated both in Italy or in the countries involved in the conflict. It allows us to understand, on the one hand, the tragedy, poor living conditions, and the challenges faced by the interviewees due to the war; and, on the other, the motivations and feelings of the humanitarian workers who found themselves in a completely different context from what they were accustomed to. This Edukit was conceived out of the need to bring to light the memories of such a tragic event and to address a historical topic that is often not properly covered or sometimes not even presented to students. Additionally, it responds to the historical context we find ourselves in today — a time when we are surrounded by wars that, after World War II, we thought would no longer be part of our vocabulary. Moreover, the memories of the volunteers serve as lessons and reflections on current migration flows and the reception system we offer. The topics explored in-depth include displacement and subsequent reception, the concept of home (especially for people who emigrated in the context of Yugoslav wars forced to leave their homes and their eventual return), the challenges faced by activists, and the trauma of the war with a particular focus on children.

The use of these kits in education proves to be very effective, especially because it goes beyond transmissive learning and allows students to learn by working on various types of sources, interpreting, analyzing and interacting, thus addressing their doubts, curiosities, and concerns that are close to their interests. Furthermore, this helps break away from traditional one-way teaching and promotes practical and direct engagement; it enhances critical analysis of the proposed topic. Through the educational kit, tools are provided to approach and develop critical thinking regarding the events presented, with the result being both memorization and interpretation. Here is a short summary of the contents.

The workshops Building bridges; Your Home, my Home; The Challenges of activism; Childhood trauma and Choices in conflict aim to foster a deeper understanding of these themes through excerpts from interviews sharing the personal experiences of those interviewed. The proposed methodology includes group work, critical discussion, and dialogue. We recommend using these methods in formal education

settings.

The workshops Memoryscape; Museum Curators: Personal Objects, Opinion-metre; (In)Equality, Racing Board Game, and Membership aim to engage younger generations in active reflection on their interpretations and thoughts on identity, belonging, the processes of building a home, and privilege. The methods include critical approaches and practical learning. We recommend using these methods in non-formal education settings, where individuals can share their experiences with peer groups.

Extracts from the workshops: how to use it in formal and informal education

As part of a broader educational toolkit designed to explore various themes through different workshops, “Your Home, My Home” provided a space for participants to delve into the concept of home. This workshop involved a few dozen teenagers from Milan, drawn from both informal educational backgrounds and a high school class. The diverse group brought together young Italians and first and people with a migratory background, enriching the discussions with a variety of perspectives and experiences.

The workshops were designed to explore the concept of home from both personal and collective perspectives. Participants shared their experiences and reflections on what “home” means to them, starting with the definition of the term in their mother tongues. This initial discussion revealed the multifaceted nature of the concept of home, showing it to be more than just a physical place; it also encompasses relationships, emotions, and memories. In the first part of the activity, participants reflected collectively on the various meanings of home, highlighting how its understanding can vary significantly depending on individual and cultural experiences.

Afterwards, the young people were invited to choose a word from the Moj Dom project glossary, which included terms like “change,” “community,” “cohabitation,” “culture,” “integration,” “ties,” “freedom,” “memories,” “rootlessness,” “relationships,” “reappropriation,” “shelter,” “choice,” “security,” “solidarity,” “space,” “stability,” and “temporariness.” Each participant selected the word that most resonated with their personal experience of home and shared the reasons for their choice with the group. An interesting aspect of the workshop was the use of art. Participants were encouraged to visualize their concept of home by drawing. These drawings ranged from detailed floor plans of their rooms to more abstract representations of the feelings and memories associated with their living spaces. For example, some sketches depicted a favourite view from a bedroom window or a symbolic object that evokes the essence of home. These visual elements provided a deeper, more personal insight into each participant’s relationship with their home environment. A significant moment in the workshops was when participants replicated the interview work carried out by the Moj Dom researchers, collecting each other’s stories through the homes they have lived in throughout their lives. In pairs, the young people explored and discussed the homes they had lived in, what they loved or disliked about those spaces, and what objects or sensations made them feel at home even when they were not there.

These activities revealed recurring themes among the young participants, especially those with a migration background. Many perceived Milan as their current home. One, facing the decision of whether to continue his studies outside of the city or in Milan, realized that he wanted to stay in his hometown. Experiences in Milan are not always positive, though. The living conditions described were often characterized by small, overcrowded spaces, a reality that contrasts with nostalgic memories of previous homes. However, some young people still consider their country of origin as their “true” home, maintaining a strong connection to past memories and experiences. A common emerging theme was the difficulty in perceiving home as a refuge or a place of well-being. For many participants, home is not a place where they feel comfortable or protected. Some even described it as a place of danger. Participants often said that home to them was another place, such as an educational centre, where they felt free to be themselves or even someone who loved them.

A space for deep reflection

The stories and experiences shared in the workshops highlighted the multiple dimensions of home: as a physical place, a space for relationships, an emotional refuge, and, at times, a source of tension or discomfort.

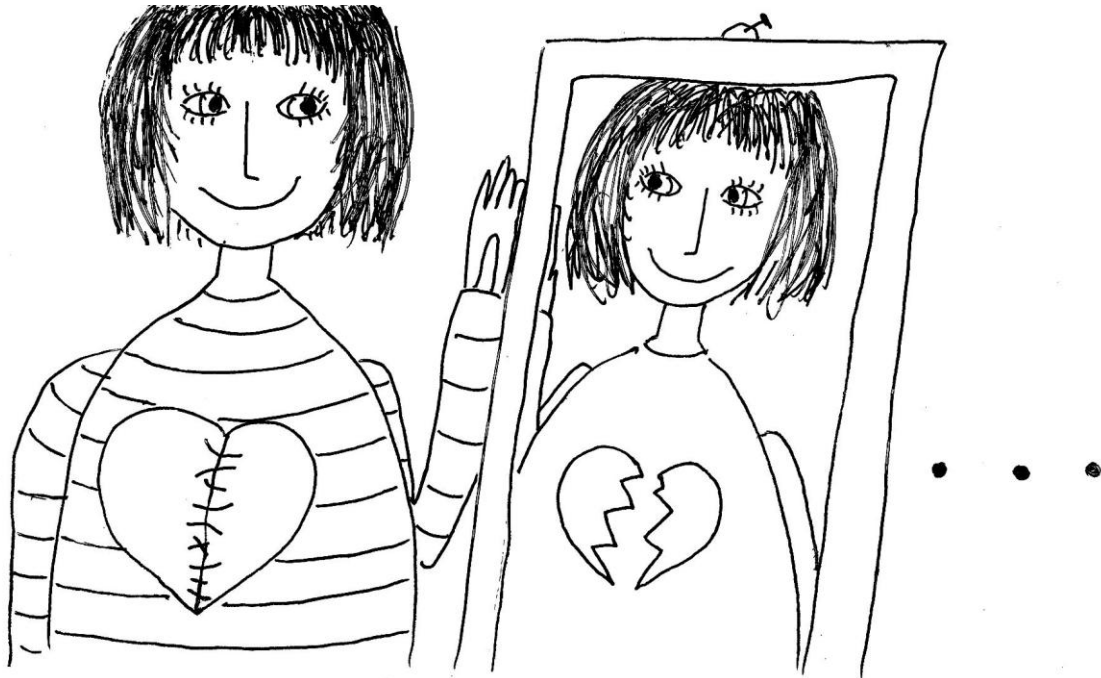
This experience showed how the concept of home is closely linked to personal experiences, socio-economic conditions, and cultural realities. It also highlighted the importance of providing spaces for dialogue and reflection for young people, especially those in difficult situations, where they can express their emotions, share their stories, and perhaps rethink what home truly means.

Ultimately, the Moj Dom project invites us to reflect not only on what home means for each of us but also on how we can build more inclusive and welcoming spaces that respond to the diverse needs and realities of people.

Interview with Damir Avdić

Author:

Zala Dobovšek is a dramaturg, theatre critic, theatre scholar, and assistant professor in dramaturgy and performance studies.



Stitches consists of a series of short stories that originate from the same triggering moment – war – but are very different in format and content. It is diverse in terms of time, generation, and genre. How did the selection of the stories actually take place? What was important to you in the final selection, and what effects did you hope to achieve?

The selection sort of “found itself”, as it often happens to me when I’m working on a music album. I had a lot of stories in my memory and in my head, and it seems as if the stories then made their own “natural selection”, as if they “claimed” their own place. But at the same time, it’s also about constantly building on them. Just a few days ago, I brought a whole new story to rehearsals that had been brewing somewhere. The crew accepted it, but I still didn’t know how to fit it into the performance, because it was long, full of information, but I didn’t want it to be a kind of novel, I wanted it to have a quicker point. Well, then, it found its place in the plot on an equal footing with all the others. I must also point out that I feel a tremendous bond in the team at the level of interpersonal trust, so our ideas and suggestions circulate all the time and are absolutely on an equal footing with each other. We talk a lot, we exchange opinions, we look for positions together that we will adopt as our own, and we stand firmly behind them in the performance.

On the other hand, the individual stories chosen are different, some of them are my experiences of war, others are the experiences of others. I am interested in the invisibility of the pain or in the consequences for those who have survived the war. Who have terrible traumas and losses, but they don’t talk about it, and I just know what they’ve been through and are still going through. I am interested in those stories, but of course, it is not easy to get to them. I know a lot of the people involved, but often, my questions about the war experience have been answered in a single sentence. It is simply not talked about, and I wonder how these people get on with their lives. I may know the story, but only they know how they really cope with it.

How do you understand the position of responsibility to speak out in this context? Where or whose responsibility is it really to shed light on the catastrophes of war when it's your story, but also when it's not your story?

Rather than a question of who is responsible, I think the main responsibility lies in how we approach other people's sensitive, intimate stories; the responsibility for me is to leave them in their original form, not to use them for my own benefit – even though I am telling them in the first person. To tell them and at the same time already “let it go”, not to judge them, not to put my own spin on them. It's not a matter of being vague; everything is said, but it is about preserving the possibility of one's own individual interpretation. It could be called “responsibility for authenticity”. It is very easy to bring our own interpretation into other people's stories. In cases of “trauma bonding”, it is even quicker to project our own projections onto someone else's. In the case of the story of Jasenovac is a representation of my father's total denial of the fact of his father's (my grandfather's) death, which took place sixty years ago. He chose ignorance instead, quite legitimately. I accepted his denial and never pressured him. Today, my father is an old man with dementia, and I will never know what exactly he felt. That is what interests me. How people like him, who have always denied the truth, have dealt with it in their lives.

Traumatic experiences always contain a (temporal) paradox. Sometimes it is only with the passage of time that we realise that they were not so catastrophic after all, and sometimes it is the other way around – only after many years do we realise how catastrophic they actually were.

Just as I was on my way to this meeting and interview, I was thinking about my cousin and how he deals with the past because he acts as if nothing had happened. I know exactly what happened. The reasons for balancing consciousness are always different and not necessarily at all related to medication, the tranquillisers. Often, memories overlap with different activities, but there is simply no single answer here. From the outside, these situations seem complex to you, which is normal, but when I think about my own experience, I do not really find any complexity. It is the story that adds complexity. But again, as I said at the beginning, imposed complexity can sometimes be an abuse in describing a story. The performance is about war, it is logical for people to expect complexity, but there is none here, everything is said in a rather “classical” way. And on the other hand – what is complexity anyway? Complexity is also the fact that people who have never picked up a book in their lives read an unusually large amount during the war.

Where do you see the advantages and pitfalls of presenting images and stories of war in a very direct, illustrative way and, on the other hand, in a poetic, allegorical way?

I feel that I always take the “direct” route, but the key for me is to leave the narrative – however direct it may be – open and ready for wider interpretation at the end of the day. I don't want to impose a direct, single-minded point of view, not only on other people's stories but also on my own stories. I often experience this at concerts when someone in the audience tells me their vision of a song, while I personally perceive it in a completely different way. And that's perfectly legitimate. On the other hand, there is also the contact between reality and art on the level of our visual animations in the performance, which sometimes show very concrete images, but nevertheless contain a distance, because they are not photographs, but animations, and therefore the interpretation that animation as such always contains.

How do you perceive your own position as a creator – both as a performer and as a musician – at this very time when social consciousness is so strongly marked by war, by the wars in Ukraine and Palestine. What happens, what changes, and what do you think is “resonating” in your expression, which, in fact, you don't really have any influence on because it is only society, politics and the public that can draw attention to your (war) identity, your expression.

We were already talking about this project with the Maska Institute before the war broke out in Ukraine, so the beginnings of the conception and discussions go back to before that. In the meantime, there was

this kind of parallel with my album *Mainstream Horror*, which has various allusions to the war and also describes some concrete war or military scenes. Of course, the album was made before that, but it came out at the same time as the war in Ukraine started, and because of a few verses, it got a kind of cheap relevance, so I changed almost half of the songs... I was really scared of the topicality appearing on its own. I didn't really want that. But with *Stitches*, it's clear that no ideological side is taken in any of the stories, which is why the portraits of the people go beyond the war identity. In any case, it was clear from the beginning that the intention was not to address any particular war that is going on now. It's also that my own experience of war makes me very aware that I can't possibly be talking about their war – it's such a very different experience. Besides, it is a different time, different weapons, everything is different. Every war is a tragedy, but every war is different.

Every war is always a collective act, but its memory is always individual, isn't it?

I remember my own delusion when, after the end of the war, I thought that the whole world had ended where our war had begun. No, of course, the world went on. It took me almost ten years to really grasp that. The facts about when people left the war zone in Bosnia are also extremely interesting. The first ones who left before the war started, the second ones who left in between, and the third ones who left when the war ended. When I met them again years later, I could tell exactly when they had left without being told. It was clear from the way they talked about their town – they talked about it as they last remembered it, not as it is now. I know someone who left Tuzla for England during the war, stayed there for a year and came back when the war was at its worst. We thought he was mad. He said, "There's nothing in London." It was as if going back to the war had made him "happy". Very strange. I see these stories, let's say, as potential for a future project ...

Could it be said that in *Stitches*, you place the drama primarily in the human being or in the fellow human being in the war? The drama of war is seen and happens in itself anyway.

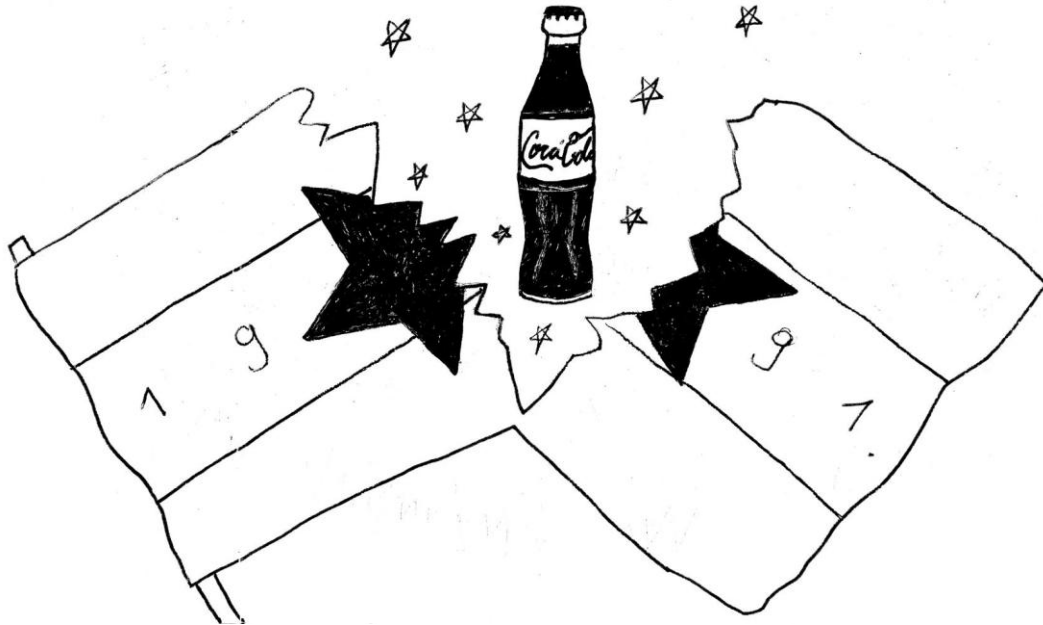
Certainly, the human being is at the centre of all the stories. The human being in the war and how he copes with it. How do people deal with themselves after the war? What happens to them, how they struggle with their own existence, with memory, with forgetting... These things are not easy to find out in everyday life. At the same time, these are quite ordinary people who have not necessarily ended up on tranquillisers either. Perhaps the most accurate starting point would be: How are they coping with it all? How do they live after the war without any complaining, just living... At the same time, I know that everything is stored in the memory and that we are always just one association away from the horrors of war and old fears coming to the surface.

The Resilience of History

Authors:

Blaž Kavšek is a Slovenian cultural theorist, editor, and writer known for his contributions to the intersection of art, history, and social commentary.

Gregor Moder is a Slovenian philosopher and cultural theorist who serves as a Senior Research Associate in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana.



After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the abandonment of the communist project in Eastern Europe at the turn of the 20th century, it seemed that the political-economic regime of liberal democracy, specifically in its neoliberal variant as envisioned and championed especially by Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, stood without a viable competing alternative. It seemed that the specific mixture of parliamentary democracy, economic liberalism, and cultural Protestantism succeeded in securing its perpetuity in the global theatre not only politically, but also, and more importantly, ideologically. It was the political scientist Francis Fukuyama, one of Reagan's key advisors and an early supporter of American global unilateralism, who expressed this triumphant moment of capitalism in its purest form when he argued in an article from 1989 and a book from 1992 that the long history of human progress had finally reached its endpoint. It was the End of History! His main point was that, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was history that effectively demonstrated that the idea of liberal democracy could not even be significantly improved upon with time, much less replaced by a superior model of sociopolitical organisation.

Fukuyama's victory cry of liberalism, articulated as a theoretical claim, has been heavily criticised ever since it was made on almost every point of the argument and from every possible angle. We accept the criticism of Fukuyama's claim as fully justified. What motivates this book, however, is that there was nevertheless something that Fukuyama got right, even though not in the sense that he thought he did. In terms of the theoretical and philosophical claims, Fukuyama's thesis gained support only from liberal thinkers, while it was always rejected or heavily criticised on the left. But in the practical sense, in the sense of lived experience, one could claim that, at least for a brief moment in time, there was a region in the world that lived the fantasy of the "end of history" as its immediate, unreflected reality. It was, of course, the very region where the dramatic historical shift took place – Eastern Europe. For the most

part, the 1990s were a time of prosperity for Eastern Europe. After a series of regime changes and implementation of capitalist reforms, the region caught global attention politically, economically, and culturally; and for a while, at least for those who would seize them, there was indeed an abundance of opportunities for all kinds of grassroots initiatives. There was a price to pay, of course. The gradual but steady erosion of social rights (especially reproductive) and social welfare was documented and seriously discussed, just as was the continuous growth of the divide between the poor and the wealthy and the decline of social mobility. In the context of refurbishing national mythologies, there were several instances of suppression of ethnic or religious minorities – the treatment of Roma people and other minorities being perhaps the most universal example of “sacrifices” that were made in the process of nation-building fervour. Nevertheless, the overall image of Eastern Europe in the (early) 1990s was one of revival and reinvigoration, and as long as the majority of the population was enjoying a perceived improvement in their quality of life – mostly in the form of access to goods deemed luxurious not so long before – those “sacrifices” seemed only minor, or simply unavoidable. It is in this practical sense only that one can perhaps claim that the dream of the end of history toward which human progress flowed was, to an extent, the actual political and social reality of Eastern Europe, even if only for a very brief period.

In the early 1990s, as Eastern Europe largely experienced a peaceful transition from socialist economies to capitalist systems, there was one notable exception that stood out—a troubling anomaly that defied easy explanation: the wars in Yugoslavia. No one appeared to have a good answer as to how those wars were even possible, much less why they were fought, especially as the violence rapidly escalated into mass torture and genocide. It was especially unhelpful that Yugoslavia had been the most Westernised among the socialist states in Europe, one of the most economically developed (albeit unevenly) and politically open-minded, and one that had split with the Soviet bloc as early as 1948 and sought an independent path between the doctrines of planned and market-oriented economy – the path of self-management. Alongside political and economic reforms taking place during the 1970s and especially the 1980s, and with its history of multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic prosperity, Yugoslavia had every chance to become the “star” of the transition to neo-liberal capitalism. How could it have become practically the only former socialist country in Europe that took a completely different path? The Yugoslav wars seemed out of place, and especially out of their own historical time. Fukuyama himself vehemently insisted on the idea that liberal democracy is the best cure against wars in general, and that war as a concept thus also belongs to the human past (Fukuyama, 1992). This notion, advocated in some sense already by Kant, even though he speaks about a federation of republics (Kant, 2006), was later shared by Steven Pinker and many others (Pinker, 2013). But for the countries emerging from the remains of Socialist Yugoslavia, the transition to capitalism was inextricably connected with war and destructive malice. One of the cultural products that captured this uncanny conjunction of war and capitalism with true effect was a series of postcards made by TRIO Sarajevo, a group of designers, called “Ironic Postcards from a City at War,” sent from a besieged city struggling in fear of murderous snipers and heavy bombardment between 1992 and 1995. Many of these postcards play with the relations between mass culture, mass production, mass consumption, and mass murder. One of the posters was a paraphrase of the global “Enjoy Coca-Cola” advertisement, except that the text says, “Enjoy Sarajevo”. The substitution of Coca-Cola with Sarajevo does not only establish a link between mass consumption and war, but it also underlines the split within Eastern Europe itself, the split between the part that got to enjoy the fantasy of the end of history, and the part that got to enjoy the very outrage of history itself. Judging by how the Yugoslav wars were reported on and discussed especially in the West – as basically unintelligible, pre-modern ethnic violence – one would be safe to assume that they were considered a kind of strangely resilient remnant of some long-forgotten past, of something that humanity, just as Fukuyama suggested, had essentially already overcome and left behind. Wars as such seemed of questionable importance at a time when the Cold War was over and the US and the newly formed Russian Federation had agreed to continue reducing their nuclear stockpiles. The global elites in London and New York called the very status of nation-states into question, making the national wars in Yugoslavia seem utterly atavistic, even primitive. From the globalist perspective, it looked like

Yugoslavia somehow had not received the memo that it was ideologically lagging behind. But we would be equally justified to claim that the glitch in the historical time that was revealed in the Yugoslav wars was one from the future, rather than from the past. While the idea of the end of history has always been theoretically suspicious, it took many years – a decade – for the cracks in the imaginary structure of the political practice in Eastern Europe to become fully apparent and culturally acknowledged. This was perhaps most directly thematised in the 2004 film *Czech Dream* (Český sen, d. Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda), where the film directors, who play themselves, convince an advertising company to launch a huge media campaign for a new hypermarket called Czech Dream. The campaign is “honest” in the sense that it explicitly warns that people should “not believe it” and that they “shouldn’t come” to shop there. When 3,000 people nevertheless show up for the grand opening and start walking toward what looks like a large building in the distance, it is revealed that it was all a hoax, and the building promising the dream of pure consumer happiness is nothing but a large canvas, supported by scaffolding. The notion that the political-economic regime of late capitalism is neither a natural occurrence nor the historical fulfilment of humanity’s destiny could not simply be explained by philosophers and political scientists, it had to be experienced publicly and culturally, under what Hegel described as the process of the labour of the concept.

We can find another example of such a cultural experience in the 2003 German film *Good Bye, Lenin!* The film is set in East Berlin between two events, the fall of the wall in 1989 and the reunification of East Germany with West Germany in 1990. The film is a comedy with a sense of cultural nostalgia and features some truly wonderful scenic elements, such as the one where, practically overnight, a city covered with huge red flags promoting communism begins displaying huge red flags promoting Coca-Cola. This simple substitution, employed in the film for comic effect, reveals a deep truth about the functioning of ideology as such. It is not just that there is an element of radical, irreducible contingency in any ideological formation, and that in the practical sense, much like Louis Althusser argued, ideology only exists in its completely material institutions and practices, precisely in what it displays as absolutely evident (Althusser 2020). In a deeper sense, the substitution of communist red with Coca-Cola red indicates that ideology functions precisely as the minimal difference, or even as one simple signifier which becomes the central one. In other words, the vast complexity of institutional, historical, cultural, social and political differences can be ultimately reduced to one minimal difference, no bigger than the difference between two shades of red. From this point of view, the effort of ideology critique may be ultimately described as the attempt to discern the complexity of the given ideological formation as a specific shade of red. *Good Bye, Lenin!* succeeds in this effort, not because it alludes to how cheaply Eastern Germans sold themselves (as if saying that “they exchanged their communist project for a soda drink”), but rather in showing that what appears at first sight merely as a soda commercial in truth reveals a complex ideological structure that requires enormous social and political effort to maintain. A Coca-Cola commercial can substitute for a poster of Lenin only because it shares the poster’s structural logic, its ideological function.

The proper cultural effect of films like *Czech Dream* or *Good Bye, Lenin!* should not be described as disillusionment, because it would be too naïve to assume that they speak from some sort of ideologically neutral perspective, from a position of “naked truth.” Their effect is, nevertheless, critical, because what they manage to do is to make palpable a certain glitch in the ideological structure; they create a short circuit within the ideological current, revealing that the ostensibly “evident” or “natural” order of our reality is constructed. This glitch or short circuit can also help us understand the specific un-timeliness that can be observed when discussing Yugoslav wars within the (Eastern) European context, the fact that they appeared in their own time as strangely belonging to the past, but that we can discuss them, from the perspective of the 2020s, as a prefiguration of what was to happen much later, on a much larger scale – foreshadowing the rise of nationalism and populism, as well as the “return” of war and genocide. We can refer to this glitch as indicative of some traumatic kernel of our contemporary capitalist modernity. *Enjoy Sarajevo*, the poster that produced a condensation of mass consumerism and mass murder such as defined much of the space of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, functioned so well precisely because it clashed with the dominant liberal fantasy of the time, but can also be read as

an eerie reminder that modernity as such is yet unfinished, that its historical trajectory has still yet to be revealed to us. But even if we understand it in a much more modest framework, as merely a visual document that perfectly captures the contradictions of its historical moment in Eastern Europe of the early 1990s, it is a perfect illustration of what this monograph seeks to engage with: the historical trauma of the Yugoslav wars as mediated in cultural and artistic practices. Our objective in analysing and discussing this mediation is double. Firstly, our volume aims to contribute to the understanding of the relationship of art to trauma in general and to examine specific cases of how art works with war and migration trauma in particular. But, secondly, this volume should also be read as a contribution to the argument that artistic mediation, especially theatre, potentially offers a privileged entry point towards understanding trauma as a social and historical phenomenon.

This excerpt is from the introduction of the monograph [The Resilience of History: Yugoslav Wars Through Art](#), published by Maska as part of the Moj Dom project.

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Refugees, migration
and erased memories
in the aftermath of
Yugoslav wars



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