

Guardians of the Spoon

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In collaboration with
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How should we approach the photos of the sites of Fascist concentration camps? What is there for us to see? Jacques Lacan's notion of gaze can be of some help here. It involves the reversal of the relationship between subject and object: there is an antinomy between the eye and the gaze, as the gaze is now on the side of the object, it stands for the blind spot in the field of the visible from which the picture itself photographs the spectator; or, as Lacan puts it in his Seminar I, the uncanny evocation of the central scene of Hitchcock's *The Rear Window* is sustained by the fact that the seminar was held the same year Hitchcock's film was shot (1954):

"I can feel myself under the gaze of someone whose eyes I do not see, not even discern. All that is necessary is for something to signify to me that there may be others there. This window, if it gets a bit dark, and if I have reasons for thinking that there is someone behind it, is straight away a gaze."

This is also what happens when we cast our eyes on the photos of what remains of the Fascist concentration camps. The point is not what we look at and what we see, but how these photos themselves in a way return the gaze, how they "regard" (concern) us, how they awaken us, making us aware not only of past horrors but also how these horrors are still alive today – the photos are those that photo-graph us.

Such an awakening brings to mind a strange case that took place on October 21 2008 in Palermo: the media reported that 66 year-old Antonio Tripoli was found shot and unconscious; after 10 days in a deep coma he unexpectedly awoke, was shown photos of those suspected of the shooting, and with a nod of his head identified his 23 year-old nephew Domenico Gargano, and then promptly dropped dead. Quite an appropriate story for Sicily, an almost literal realization of the mythic murder victim who briefly returns from the dead to denounce his murderer. So it is as if, when we look at the photos of concentration camp sites, that they momentarily shake us from our daily mindless existence and make us aware of who the real criminals were.

Slavoj Žižek









Memories of internment in Italian fascist camps

1941-1943





My mother was 18 when she was sent to the camp. She had me there when she was 19. I was lucky to have a mother who, deprived of everything, had breast milk, because many children had died there. After we returned from the camp, she put me in foster care and went to work with the Partisans. I met her three times later in my life. Even after I had a family of my own, when we paid her a visit, she said nothing about Gonars. It seems to me that she suffered the worst because of it. For me, it was painful that I never lived with her, that people marked me as a "bastard" rather than "a child of war". But I guess I just naturally knew how to turn all these experiences into something somehow good.



Francka Šajn (b. Pungerčar, 1943, Gonars, Italy)







We got lice right away. And I had strong, beautiful hair. My mother had nowhere to hide me... they came and cut it. I cried so much, but they cut it nevertheless, by force. After that they gave me my braid, but what was I to do with that?



Albina Vogrin (b. Žagar, 1930, Novi Kot)







We were afraid every time they forced us to bathe. We had to get fully undressed, get naked. They screamed: "Giú, giú le mutande! Take off all your clothes!" and the water was freezing cold, or boiling hot. They were mean.



Ana Kovačič (b. Špeh, 1922, Šmarata - 2016, Šmarata)







They were all lined up, a big pot of pasta in front of them. I was last, and afraid the food would run out before it was my turn. I was shaking, looking at bowl full of pasta! I looked around where to sit, but I couldn't move. And then it came to my mind, because they were saying we would be going to a sanatorium - If I have managed to live this far, with food like this, I may even survive and get back home. I was crying, with tears dropping into my food, but I kept on eating.



Stanko Kotnik (b.1925, Bloke – 2014, Ljubljana)



General Cuiuli, who was nicknamed “serpente” (snake), was the commander of the Rab concentration camp, where more than 1400 people died of hunger and disease. He was buried with honours back home in Italy.



I cannot understand the neglect of every single testimony regarding the biggest Italian killing ground of innocent Slovenes. The concentration camp on Rab has been so belittled or rather so neglected or ignored. Never - and I attended the annual anniversaries at Rab often - was there ever anyone from Slovenia in any official capacity there. I resent the church too, for stomping into silence all of the voices critical of our treatment during the war.



Stane Kirn (b. 1924, Kamnik pod Krimom)





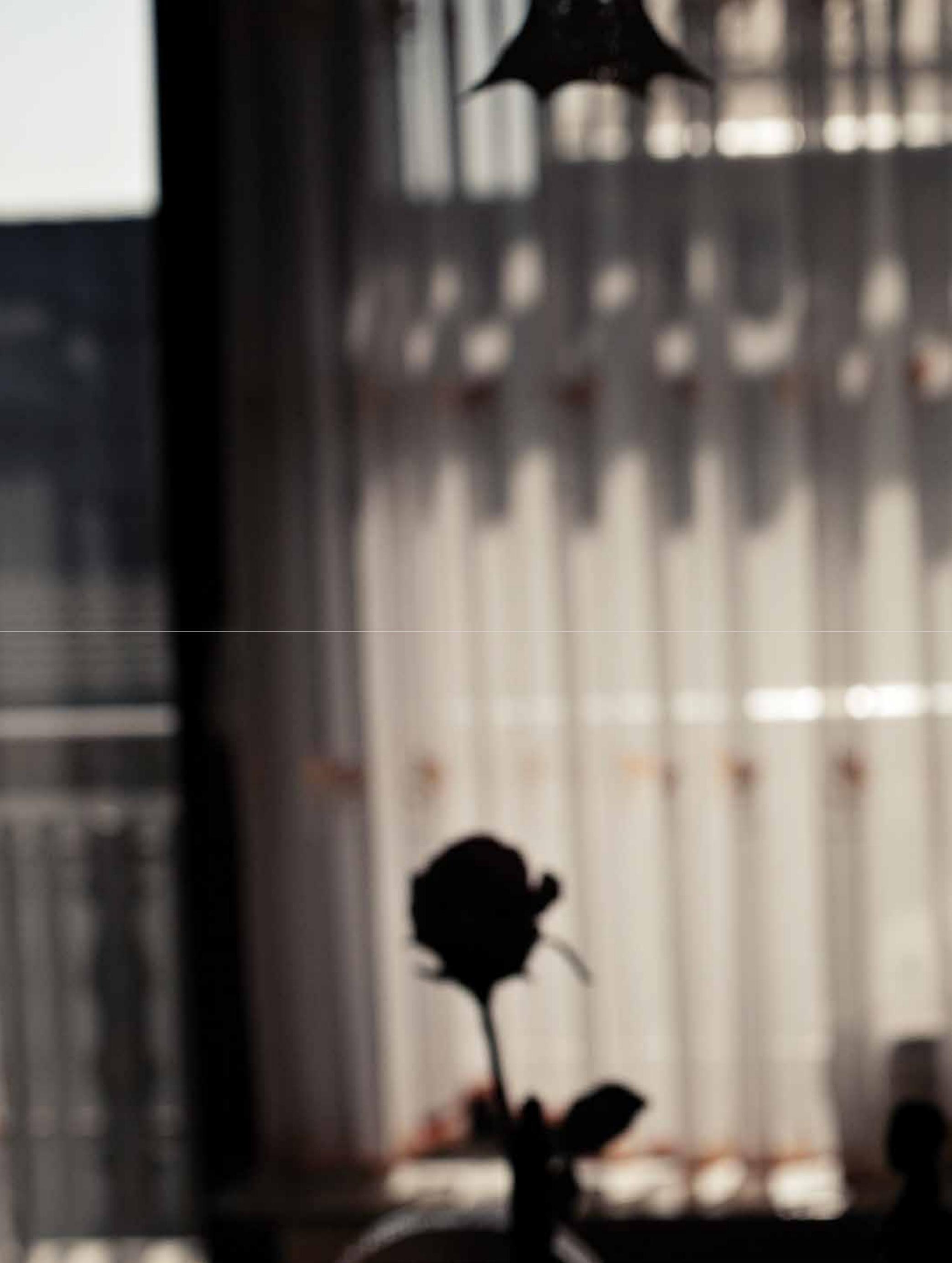
When I was enrolled into High School No. 1, my mother had a premonition that she would be gone, would not come back. And she said to my father's cousin: if I don't come back, you have to take care of her.



Magda Lovec, memory of her mother Justina Trtnik (1908, Ljubljana – 1943, Urh)



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My father had to go to the line at the end of the village, where they were gathering men to be shot against the wall. He managed to live only because he was standing at the end of the line. They killed 28 men and boys that day, burnt 7 villages and destroyed 107 homes. That was the last time I saw my sick grandmother and my baby brother Drago, who my mother gave to the nuns in Matulje to care for. However, I was always a happy child, bringing light, even when we were picking up the dead. That's how I was raised, that's how my mother and my aunt were. There is no place for crying in war - you work to survive, you fight for life.



Ana Marija Cetin Lapajne (b. 1935, Dolnja Bitnja)

ABDOVICH HAJROGADAMIC JUSTA DEM
AHLA JUTANTOV MUO ANICIC LINNEA
AO ALEKSIC RUMILORAD ALESIC
POLIC STANKO JANZIC TIAN FRAZ
MIRKO ARMUS YUKOTA ARSENIĆ DU
JOVO BABIC NIKOLA BACA JOCE BAC
LOŠ BAN ALOJZ BAN JOSE BAN JU
BANIC PALE BAKA JOSE BAKA
JIC AFRAM BAKRETOSIC MILISAV
JLA BAUER BOGDAN BACON JOSE
BESOSEVIC DANILO BELLAC S
DI BEZINA TASKA BICKI BDIJARDA
JIMERMAN TELMI BIEZERICO
SLAVOVIC BOGATELJ ANTON BOD
VIC BOZO BOJANIC RADE BOK
BOLJETVIC MILAN BOMAS B
VIC TAJIC BOZIC FRANC BOZ
BREKO FRANC BREKELJ
BURELJ TIAN BUBLE GIGA B
SINOC BUNIC GULAJC CZE
BOZO BULJ MARKO BULJETIC
JEEBAK BULJ MARINA BUL
BRAJVIC JANICE BULJETIC
BULE OBLIC STJEPAN BULJETIC

I was interned as a seven-year-old boy, together with my family, at the Bakar, Rab and Gonars camps. I survived, but as an orphan. My worst experience – worse even than seeing my father for the last time – was in Gonars, when I heard that he had died. It was the biggest blow in my life. I went back to my bunk bed in barrack no. 21 and cried, cried, cried. I became so weak I had to be taken to the infirmary.



Herman Janež (b. 1935, Stari Kot)

Martina Košak's silver spoon.

Martina was a nurse on the island of Rab, and endured much. She carried it with her when she was in jail, in a camp or part of the National Liberation Army. Martina kept it until her death, when she chose me to be its guardian.

Martina was with the children who were lying on the floor. They had no water, no paper to place under the children, who all had such terrible diarrhea that the floor beneath them became infested with worms. She said it felt so terrible that as a woman and a nurse she could not bare it, could not endure it.



Dear friends

Writing to you again
yesterday and now again
to let you know that
the children are all well
and that we are very
busy here.

With love to all

Yours ever



Every morning, the capo (chief) was to report on the situation in the barrack, and the duty officer saluted and expected me to respond with the saluto romano (Fascist salute). And that's where the trouble began. Because they couldn't make me do it, they tied me to a pole, hands behind my back, preferably so you could barely stand on your feet - completely isolated, without water, for several hours. Then they would let you go. The day I was sent to prison I made it my goal to carry on the struggle against the occupier using any means possible.



Anton Vratuša (b. 1915, Dolnji Slaveči)







I wanted to take my father to Rab. I asked him repeatedly to go there with me, to explain, to show me everything first-hand. He said: "I'm never going back to Rab again."

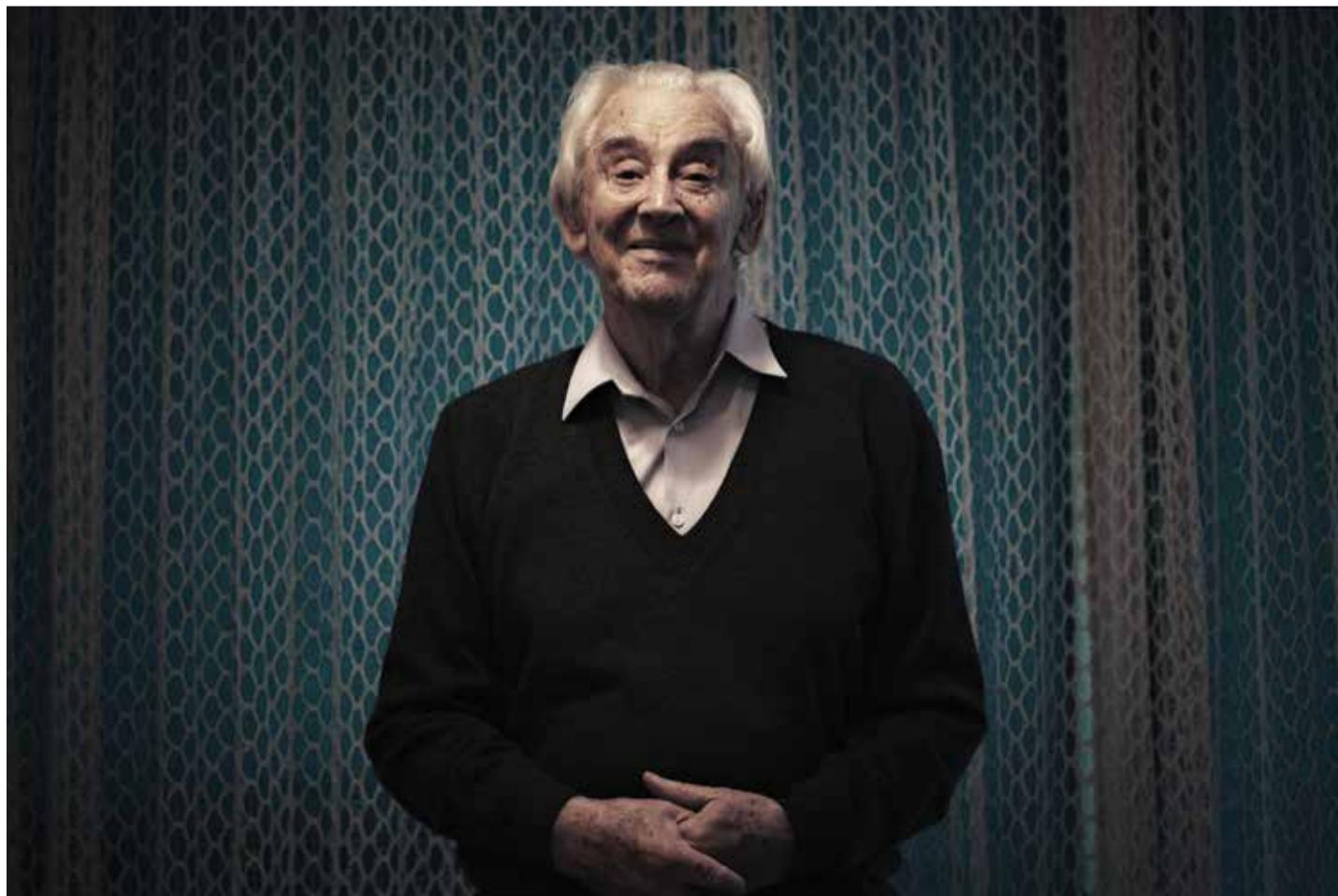
It was awful, what my father told me. If your digestion stopped working because you had nothing to eat, you died. They told me how someone once crossed the camp ground and collapsed from exhaustion and died. People passed out simply from straining on the toilet.



Andrej Likovič, memory of his father Franc Likovič (b.1906, Tomišelj – 1996, Grosuplje)



I was interned as an eighteen-year-old pupil to Gonars and Monigo. I grew weak and contracted pulmonary tuberculosis there. I remained in treatment for the next eleven years. I started attending school in February 1943, a month after I came back from internment. I was doing much better, but was still ill. There was one Italian teacher. She was very beautiful, with black hair. Whew, she was beautiful indeed! And not a bit aggressive towards me. But, even though I read Italian technical literature on radio engineering, because there was nothing else available, and I assembled radio receivers following Italian instructions and I spoke Italian very well, I couldn't bring myself to open my mouth. I did not do a single assignment. Nothing. Not a single thing. Then, after a month or so my health became so much worse that I was taken to the hospital.



Peter Starič (b. 1924, Ljubljana)







My mother's friend took me as a little girl to the Lanthieri Castle, dressed in a Slovenian flag, to wait for my mother to return. But, I didn't know this mother - my mother - she was a complete stranger to me. And we went down there, and of course my mother rushed towards me, she started crying, holding me tight, and I started crying because I had no idea who she was.



Magda Rodman, memory of her mother Olga Bajc (b. 1913, Duplje - 1972, Vipava)





Spomien iz internacij

3. 10. 42 -

22. 4. 43

roku 1943

Milka

Milka

Uta

Francesca

Frank

Helle

Horika

Randa

Slovenia sem
in bom
ostalo!

Fanni

Rab, Croatia

Interned men, women and children lived in overcrowded tents in the largest fascist camp for Slavs. They were malnourished, with no drinking water and without basic sanitary infrastructure. Due to the inhuman living conditions thousands died, while 1490 have been identified. The high mortality rate of the Rab internees continued after their relocation to other fascist camps. In 1953, a memorial park with a cemetery was erected by the Yugoslav authorities. Regular commemorative events still take place there.

Monigo (Treviso), Italy

The camp, arranged as a complex of military buildings, was initially an internment centre for politically dangerous civilians from the Province of Ljubljana; and later, also for internees transferred from Gonars and Rab. Despite the overcrowding and lack of food, the camp in Monigo was declared a model camp for civilian internees by the Red Cross international delegate. Over the course of 13 months 232 internees were reported to have died, among them 54 children. In January 2013 a symbolic memorial plaque was erected in the centre of Treviso.

Bakar, Croatia

The camp served mainly as a transit point for the other fascist camps. The majority of the internees were Slovenes, Croats and Serbs. They lived in around 20 wooden barracks that were fenced in by a barbed wire. Scarce historical sources suggest that malnutrition was severe and report on a typhus epidemic. Deaths were witnessed, but there is no data on the number nor the names of the dead. Nor is there any memorial to mark the tragic internment history of Bakar.

Fraschette di Alatri, Italy

The camp was meant for families, women and children, namely Maltese of British origin, Greeks, Albanians, and Yugoslavs in particular. Also many Slovene and Croatian women, suspected of collaborating with the Partisans, were interned. Living conditions in the camp were poor and food was scarce. The mortality rate was high, especially among children and the elderly. Today the site of the former camp is abandoned, and not marked with any memorial.









Visco, Italy

The first group of internees was transferred from Rab, followed by transports from Gonars and Monigo. Visco is considered to have been the most bearable among the camps for Yugoslavs – predominantly Slovenes, Croats, and Montenegrins. Food was scarce, but the housing, including the joiner's workshop, infirmary, and stone chapel, were dry and clean. After already having suffered exhaustion in earlier camps, twenty-three internees died here. It is the only preserved camp of the Fascist regime in Italy. The memorial standing in the area of the former barracks is not accessible to public.

Chiesanuova (Padua), Italy

The first group of internees in Chiesanuova was mainly comprised of men from the occupied and annexed Province of Ljubljana. Later they were relocated to Monigo, Renicci, and Rab. Their place was taken by Yugoslav military internees and internees from Zlarin and Rab (Croatia) and Ustica (Italy). Seventy internees died here. Nowhere in the area of the camp, with abandoned barracks still standing behind the former camp walls, is there any memorial.

Renicci, Italy

Internees relocated from Gonars, Chiesanuova, and Rab arrived at the Renicci camp, Municipality of Anghiari, while it was still under construction. They were settled in tents. Eating acorns kept them from starving to death. Due to the extreme cold, lack of food, and poor hygiene conditions, 160 internees died during the three winter months. In the summer of 1943 a great number of political prisoners arrived at the camp. The camp site has been converted into a memorial park. A monument to the victims as well as an ossuary stand in the Sansepolcro town cemetery.

Gonars, Italy

The first to arrive to a civilian concentration camp at Gonars were former Yugoslav officers and soldiers from the Ljubljana Province with the status of civilian internees. Then followed other civilians from the Ljubljana Province that were captured in raids and internees relocated from other camps. Internees' health was eroded by overcrowding, lice, and malnutrition. A total of 439 persons died. At the behest of the former Yugoslavia, a memorial with an ossuary was set up in the town cemetery in 1973, where the internees' remains are kept.











I've always thought it's strange that he doesn't have a grave. But in the fourth grade I found out more about my "nono" (grandfather), as I had to write a story about WWII. I visited my grandmother and she told me how my "nono" was part of a group of political prisoners considered dangerous to the Fascist regime and deported with the first convoy that left from the Ljubljana train station. They loaded them on freight cars and took them to Gonars. I still recall how she spoke of running after the train and waving to her husband, my grandfather. She cried when telling me this story, and it shook me. I've always thought that every person deserves a grave and a name, no matter what they died from.



Marjana Pahor, memory of her grandfather Angelo Pahor (b. 1897, Opatje Selo - ?)

Princip

di
giorno
essa
il tuo amore



2014-13
Dominic
188

This is my treasure: my mother's little wool cap, which she knit in internment. It is part of my identity. My mother was interned as a grammar school student for reasons unknown to anyone.



Barbara Miklič Türk, memory of her mother Danica Škrabar (b. 1924, Maribor - 1972, Ljubljana)







They carried my mother away. "My children, don't leave me, don't let me go," she yelled. Only her hands could be seen from the stretcher. And the screams. What can you do? It wasn't that I wanted to let her go now, was it? They took her away and we never saw her again.



Ivanka Zamida (b. Zabašnik, 1929, Papeži)



In regard to the poor conditions and the treatment of the internees in Fascist camps, it was not Jews that were on the bottom rung but Slovenes and Croats, ethnic minorities.



My father directed the camp choir called Little Bell of Gonars. Singing saved lives during the time of hunger, the typhus epidemic, and the lice. He told me that the conductor's baton was made from a broom handle.



Vasilka Stanovnik, remembering her father Karlo Boštjančič (b. 1915, Trieste - 2003, Jesenice)

I was interned while pregnant and gave birth in Gonars concentration camp. There were no facilities for babies in the camp. Where to wash the baby? Nowhere. Where to warm the milk they gave once you could no longer breastfeed? Where?

I had nothing for my baby. Women would tear whatever they had with them to give me those rags, so I could wrap the baby up. Then one of the women that owned a tavern back home made a surprise gift for my baby girl - she sewed a beautiful dress from an apron, which I kept until her death. My baby died at the age of three months.



Fanika Baraga (b. Ponikvar, 1920, Staje pri Igu - 2015, Ljubljana)



Life on Rab was like this – no Italian sloppiness. What else was it but a programmed, planned genocide if they interned at least 117 pregnant women? 54 or 55 children were born in internment; 13 of them died there. And Martina [Košak] and I established with certainty that nine survived. Then, 33 of those born on Rab died in Gonars. Another sixty-three were born in Gonars that had passed through Rab in their mothers' bellies.



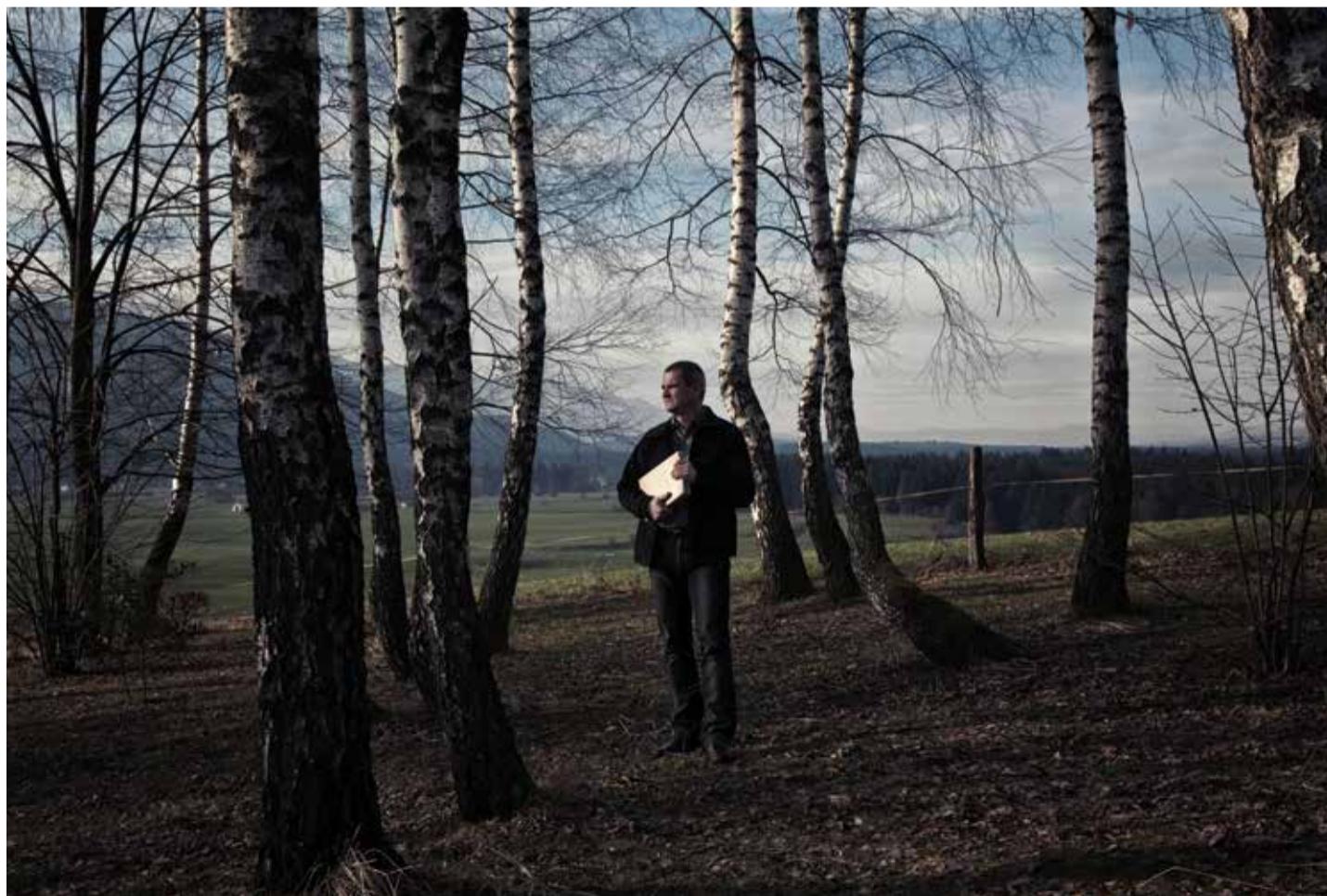
I didn't know it would be the last time I would see him alive. I was twelve years old. After that I became a self-made man. When he was pronounced dead, the bells of St. Mark rang. That's when I felt truly alone and wretched. And my mother said: "Children, your father is gone, now you'll have to earn your daily bread elsewhere, as servants to other people, where you will be used and never be treated as equals." Then I said: "No matter what, I have to succeed," and I produced my wares [traditional wooden wares from Ribnica] from 6 in the morning till 10 at night.



Anton Govže, memory of his father Anton Govže (b. 1897, Suše – 1943, Urh)



What struck me most were the oak trees. Even in his notes, my father talks about young oaks, whose acorns the famished internees tried to roast on small improvised fires in order to fend off their hunger. Their hunger - and their attempts to sate it - cost many their lives.



Janez Maršič, memory of his father Alojz Maršič (b. 1914, Babno Polje - 1995, Ljubljana)



...but over the "campo", which is big, a little stream's gurgling,
to the world witnessing, how many here are suffering.

(from D. Prašnikar's internment poetry)



Mojca Prašnikar, Bojana Kerševan, Srečka Prašnikar, memory of their father
and husband Dušan Prašnikar (b. 1920, Peščenik – 2004, Ljubljana)





In 1942 a sudden violent storm flooded the concentration camp site on the island of Rab. It only took moments, according to survivors' testimonies, for the tents to become soaked and be blown away. Children were found the next morning on the barbed wire and in the nearby spring. Dead. Drowned.





To the Guardians of the Spoon

In June 2010, Janez Maršič, a Slovene from Kočevje, decided to explore the history of his father's wartime internment in situ. He set out for the Italian town of Renicci, the site of a concentration camp during the Second World War. Janez recalls the landlady of a pension where he stayed in Renicci, and with whom he spoke about his plans. He also gave her a book about the Renicci camp, written by a local Italian historian, Daniele Finzi.

Her reaction the next morning surprised and affected me. She came to serve us breakfast, as she normally would. On her own initiative she started talking about the camp, during which she started to weep, openly and sincerely. She cried in apology, as I understood, on behalf of her nation, for all that had happened.

Janez's narrative relates to a historic period during World War II, when the Kingdom of Italy occupied parts of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1941-1943). He is one of the relatively few whose testimony reflects on the largely forgotten human rights violations suffered more than 70 years ago. Acknowledgement of Italian war crimes in the larger international context today is as uncommon as it is inconsistent. Indeed a survey of various references and encyclopaedias rarely turns up any mention of the many Italian concentration camps that served as instruments of political and racial persecution whatsoever. While the most notorious Nazi camps have become widely embedded in the popular culture and imagination, history has little if anything to say about the Italian Fascist camps.

Mussolini's Italy created a network of hundreds of places of internment, not only within the borders of Italy as we know it, but also on the territories of today's Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Albania, Greece, Libya, Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia, all controlled by Fascist Italy. The exact number of the camps remains largely unknown and uninvestigated. Similarly, the number of victims too remains unknown.

Carlo S. Capogreco, one of the leading Italian researchers of Italian Fascist internment history, rejects the myth that civilian concentration camps were particular to the Nazi system alone. Moreover, he stresses that the Jews did not occupy the bottom rung of the Fascist internee ladder - that place was held by the Slovene and Croat people. As a result of the Fascist annexation Slovenes and Croats were formally considered Italians, but in reality they were Italians in the "nobody" category. Even if the internees were not forced to work, they were exposed to the most extreme forms of neglect, which resulted in widespread suffering and death. Yet the war crimes perpetrated by the Italian Fascist authorities upon the Slavs were never the subject of any trials even remotely comparable to those of the Nuremberg trials.

In the late 1940s a Yugoslav report documenting more than 800 Italian Fascist war crimes was sent to the United Nations War Crimes Commission, but was never properly processed. The report clearly documents widespread wartime violence against civilians, crimes that included the shooting of hostages, the destroying and burning of villages, and instances of mass internment. Such a hostile military response to the growing Partisan-led resistance movement in the annexed territories was pushed to the fringes of history by the West's larger struggle with Communism in the Cold War that was to follow.

As a result, names and places like Rab, Gonars, Visco, Monigo, Chiesanuova, Renicci, Colfiorito, Fraschette di Alatri, Cairo Montenotte and others, where more than 50,000 Slovenes, Croats and other Slavs were interned, mean nothing to many, particularly the younger generations. Similarly, many international scholars in the humanities know nothing about them. Furthermore, some Italian historians dealing with the Italian Fascist camps were obstructed in their efforts and defamed. Today Italian society remains largely ignorant of these aspects of the war and its wider implications. All of the historical accounts that do exist point to these camps as sites of dehumanization, suffering and death, yet these localities rarely acknowledge in any public way the tragic events of the past. Memorials and sites of remembrance are a wholly a matter of locally driven engagement rather than any larger national awareness.

However, it's time this was acknowledged – and addressed.

By shedding light on some fragments of the destinies of Slovene victims of Italian Fascist camps we have created a social context for the long missing remembrance of the Fascist internment mechanism that constitutes an important chapter in WWII. It is an attempt to give voice to the politically induced loss of historic memory. We decided to capture and share the very tangible vulnerability of survivors and their relatives through a series of photographs from the present day, and to give them a means of expression with which to articulate their very personal experiences of internment.

The majority of testimonies, preserved documents and objects are published here for the first time. The witnesses were not easy to find: many survivors were too weak to offer any particularly lucid account, while some simply refused to come forward or participate. Due to the amount of time that had passed, we did not even hold out much hope of finding a large number of survivors. However, the gratitude the witnesses and their descendants demonstrated to us speaks volumes about the historical wrong that continues to perpetuate the marginalisation of their experience.

The importance of the storytelling herein lies in part in the notion of widespread historic amnesia. Moreover, we believe that these close-ups constitute a glimpse into the very real lives and fates of these people, and serve to reveal the structures of the internment experience, which has and continues to be so widely overlooked from a macro-historical perspective. But above all, this book is an act of remembrance, and a way to pay respect to the past victims and survivors of Italian Fascist camps and their relatives.

Manca Juvan, Saša Petejan, and Urška Strle





Timeline of Fascist internment actions and mechanisms with a special emphasis on the Slovenes:

the State Protection Act is passed to establish the state system of police confinement for people that pose a real or imminent "threat to public security". Soon afterwards the first confinements were put into effect on the islands of Favignana, Lampedusa, Pantelleria, Ustica, Lipari, Tremiti, Ponza, and Ventotene.

1926
November

the first concentration camp on the European continent is set up in Pisticci, a town in the province of Matera in southern Italy. The aim is to enforce penal re-education of anti-Fascists, who are used as an unpaid labour force in agriculture, construction and various trades.

Italy attacks, occupies and later annexes parts of Yugoslavia, including the so-called Provincia di Lubiana.

1939

1941
April

1930
September

the first trial takes place in Trieste against Slovenian anti-Fascists accused of assassinating the editorial board of the newspaper *Il Piccolo di Trieste*; four of the accused are shot, twelve imprisoned and one is sentenced to confinement.

1940
June

on entering the war, Italy introduces emergency measures, including the internment of Slovenian civilians from Venezia Giulia (to the camps at Scipione, Pollenza, Colfiorito, Isernia, Nereto) and the formation of the so-called battaglioni speciali composed of "Slavic Italians" from Venezia Giulia, which were sent to isolation camps in Sardinia and southern Italy.

1941
Summer

the Guardians project documents the first internment of civilians from Loška dolina, Province of Ljubljana, to Ustica (including the father of an internee-witness presented herein, Ana Kovačič). There are also reports of Slovenian civilians interned in Lipari.

the first internment of civilians from the Province of Ljubljana to Čiginj; arrests and internment of former Yugoslav officers in the Province of Ljubljana to Gonars.

1942
March

seven Slovene villages in Brkini and Venezia Giulia are burned down, hostages are shot, villagers are sent to prisons and internment camps.

a major Italian offensive is launched in parallel with the largest mass internment of Slovenes from the Province of Ljubljana (at Rab, Monigo, Gonars, Renici, Visco, Chiesanuova).

1942
July–October

the beginning of mass internments of "Italian Slavs", Slovenes from Venezia Giulia, particularly to Fraschette di Alatri and Cairo Montenotte.

fall of Mussolini, the first resettlements set to begin from several sites of confinement and camps.

1943
July

Italy's capitulation and the final dissolution of Italian Fascist camps; many survivors are re-interned by the Nazi occupation forces.

1943
September





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