

Smuggling Anthologies Reader

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Božo Repe

Italian-Yugoslav border after the Second World War — crossings, shopping, smuggling

From the beginning of the sixties on, Yugoslavia differed a great deal from other Eastern European countries. The difference could be seen not only in the political system but also in the standard of living in personal life; tourism, travelling, shopping abroad and the imitation of a Western life style. In addition Slovenia had a specific position within Yugoslavia: it bordered Italy and Austria, had strong national minorities in those countries, and was Yugoslavia's most developed and pro-West oriented region. This allowed Slovenia – with the exception of the first post-war years – to be constantly in touch with these two countries and to make realistic comparisons of their relative standards of living.

Italy was the first window to the Western world for the Slovene (and Yugoslav) people. The new border – to the advantage of Yugoslavia – was set between the two countries in 1957, and was incised painfully in the lives of people who had up until then lived together, first within Austria-Hungary and later, between the two World

Wars under Italy. In some cases the border ran between houses, crossed gardens, or even – as in the case of the village of Miren – divided the graveyard into two parts. Relations with Italy remained tense until 1954 when the so called 'Trieste question' was resolved by the London memorandum (the division of the Free Territory between Yugoslavia and Italy).¹ Border crossings were therefore scarce; only people who lived within two hundred meters of the frontier zone, and the so called double owners (i.e. people who possessed land in both states) were entitled to cross the border. The latter were allowed to take the shortest route to their land in the other state but forbidden to visit bigger villages or towns. In spite of strict controls on both sides of the border they did visit them (on the Italian side they were frequently recognised by their "socialist" shoes or by the license plates on their bicycles). As the first buyers of Western products, people living along the frontier used to smuggle them into Slovenia.²

¹ London Agreement (Memorandum of understanding between the Governments of Italy, the United Kingdom, United States and Yugoslavia, regarding the Free territory of Trieste) is an international agreement by which the military administration was brought to an end in Zone A and Zone B of Free Trieste Territory. It was signed by the representatives of Italy, Yugoslavia, Great Britain and USA on October 5, 1954 in London. Yugoslavia and Italy confirmed the existing demarcation, the Italian civil administration was extended throughout zone A, and the Yugoslav throughout Zone B. Guarantees were given for the unhindered return of persons who had formerly held domicile rights on the territories under Yugoslav or Italian administration, Special statute guaranteed for both sides the national rights of minorities. "White Book on Diplomatic Relations", Ministrstvo za zunanje zadeve Republike Slovenije/Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia (Ljubljana, March 1996), p. 34-39.

² Arhiv Republike Slovenije (Archives of the Republic of Slovenia): Committee for tourism and catering trade (1948/1951); Secretariat of government for trade and tourism (1962/63); Questionnaire realized by students of Department of History in border area Faculty of Arts, Ljubljana (seminar year 1996/1997); Andrej Malnič: "Topografija spomina na novo mejo", (Acta Histrie VI, Koper 1998), p. 331- 346.

In 1955 Yugoslavia and Italy signed an agreement regarding local border traffic, the so called Videm (Udine) Agreement.³ It was the first agreement of its kind to be signed by a capitalist and a socialist state respectively during the period of the Cold War. The right to cross the border was expanded to the entire population living along the frontier which resulted in a vast increase in border crossings. People from these regions were particularly keen to visit diverse fairs (i.e. the fair of St. Andrew in Gorica), where they were buying cheap goods. One of the most popular articles was the so called *bambola* (Italian doll) – a big baby doll clad in a colored dress; such dolls were placed as decorations on matrimonial beds. Furthermore, people used to buy *confetti* (for weddings), chewing gum and typical Italian sweets (i.e. panettone, amoretti...). The goods purchased on Italian stands had a major influence on forming the taste of Slovenian and Yugoslav customers in the fifties, as well as later on.

People who were not living within 10 km of the frontier zone were able to acquire a passport (either a personal, a family or a group passport). Passports were issued by the district departments for internal affairs; application for a passport could be refused without further explanation; also passports were not issued to men who had not yet served in the army. A visa was necessary for almost all the states; in addition to that, a Yugoslav citizen had to provide a letter of guarantee from the destination state. Until the beginning of the sixties administrative hindrances and also a low standard of living prevented Yugoslav citizens from more frequent visits abroad; their travel was restricted to business trips and visiting relatives. Quite a number of people crossed the border illegally and emigrated afterwards to countries overseas. In the second half of the fifties, however, tourism began to develop which re-

sulted in more frequent visits by foreigners to Yugoslavia. In the mid-sixties Yugoslavia opened up towards the world and the standard of living increased a great deal. Passport became available (with few administrative hindrances) to the majority of citizens and visas for neighbouring countries were gradually abolished. In 1962 Yugoslav citizens were allowed for the first time to legally purchase foreign currency in the amount of 15,000 dinars (50 US\$) while a larger sum was only available for the purpose of medical treatment abroad and attending international meetings and conferences). It was possible to open a bank account for foreign currency. Masses of people went to Austria and Germany to work there; through employment agencies 62,347 Slovenian citizens found work in the West between 1964 and 1969 but there were even more people who moved to the West on their own. They were coming back home for major holidays and bringing with them products from the West.

The Western shopping trend gradually moved from cosmetics, washing powder, jeans (the famous Slovenian actor Janez Hočevar still bears the nickname Rifle for being one of the first citizens of Ljubljana to wear jeans in the fifties) and tennis shoes (still called 'superge' in Slovenia, after the popular Italian trademark), to washing machines, vacuum cleaners, other domestic appliances and eventually cars. During this period Slovenian producers and trades were gradually adapting to the new needs of their customers: Gorenje started to produce domestic appliances which became popular in Eastern European countries in the following years; self-service stores and department stores began to emerge. However, the supply of goods in these shops was not as good as in the West and the prices were still higher. Like elsewhere in the world, towards the end of the sixties the teenage generation gradually became a very

3 Videmski sporazum (Udine Agreement) August 20, 1955 (Dodatek uradnega lista FLRJ/Supplement to the Official Gazette of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, 1957), p. 3-42.

strong consumer group. The socialist supply of goods was not able to cover their demands for all sorts of notebooks with portraits of film stars, felt-tip pens, school bags, fashionable clothes, records and similar articles. Even if this was not so, for example in the case of high quality Slovenian Elan skis, the products were often considered to be inferior and parents were forced to buy – with their modest socialist salaries – fashionable foreign brands of skis abroad.

Regarding the standard of living, the seventies turned out to be the best post-war years for Yugoslavia (Slovenia). The official policy had defeated the liberal orientation of the sixties; it wanted to prove that the self-managed socialism was the best system in the world. With the help of cheap loans, a large number of Slovenians were building houses of their own in the seventies. Shopping abroad proved this tendency: building materials which were either better in quality, cheaper, or not at all available in Yugoslavia were transported in car boots from abroad. The most popular articles purchased abroad were bathroom tiles, wash-basins, water-taps, furniture, diverse tools, especially for gardening, even concrete-mixers. There was a great demand for domestic appliances, foodstuffs, spirits, clothing, shoes (Italian shoes remain a byword for quality, despite the good quality of Slo-

venian products), and items which were – for ideological reasons – not available in Slovenia (communion and confirmation clothes, white shoes and handbags, etc.).

Another phenomenon of the seventies was the so called *Ponterosso*, where cheap goods and gimcrack were sold. It attracted thousands of Yugoslav buyers who were coming in organised groups by regular trains, buses and cars from the most distant parts of the country. They were buying everything, even the most worthless goods. *Ponterosso* grew into a symbol of consumer mentality, adapted to socialist buyers with little money. Hiding purchases from the customs officers (duty free imports were limited to the value of 100 dinars only) was one of the favourite Yugoslav sports of the seventies, regardless the age or sex of the people involved.

Mass shopping in Italy was also a result of the so called Osimo Agreements, which Italy signed in Yugoslavia (influenced by the spirit of Helsinki) in 1975.⁴ The Yugoslav-Italian border became by far the most open border between a socialist and a capitalist country. In 1978 over 40 million people crossed the border in the Triest region (Tržaška pokrajina);⁵ 21 million with passports and 19 million with regular border permits. New border crossing points were opened but there were still

4 Helsinki Declaration was the first act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe held in Helsinki during July and August 1, 1975. Thirty-five states, including the USA, Canada, and most European states (except Albania) signed the declaration in an attempt to improve relations in Europe, especially between the Communist bloc and the West. Declaration was an important effort to reduce Cold War tensions. Among ten points of the declaration was also one on the inviolability of frontiers and the Final Act stated that frontiers in Europe should be stable and only change by peaceful means. Following the spirit of the Declaration, on November 10th 1975 at Osimo, near Ancona, Yugoslavia and Italy signed the so-called Osimo Agreements. They were internationally considered to be the first direct fulfilment of the principles of Helsinki Declaration. They contain three fundamental documents: The agreement between SFRY and Republic of Italy on boundaries and border related questions, the Agreement on Accelerating Economic Cooperation and the protocol on Joint Free Zones. The economic part of the Agreement was also confirmed by European Economic Community. Agreements at first place regulate the internationally recognized stated boundaries which as not been determinate by the 1947 Peace Treaty with Italy and with them also London agreement was overpassed. Following independence, Slovenia took over the obligations from the international agreements signed by the former SFRY. In relation to the Osimo Agreements Slovenia did so through an exchange of notes on July 31st in Rome. Upon publications of the documents in the Italian Official gazette some protest arose in Italy, repudiating Slovenia's legal succession in these agreements and the demanding that they be revised, which was in first years after Slovene independence also a part of Italian policy, finally abandoned after an Association Agreement with the EU (came into effect in 1999).

5 Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, Chamber for economy (1962/1992).

traffic hold-ups in spite of that, especially during weekends – a phenomenon which began in the sixties. The frontier zone was increased to 30 km. The residents of Jesenice, a community bordering on Austria and Italy were entitled to Austrian and Italian regular border permits.

The authorities were not enthusiastic about shopping abroad because so much money was spent on there; but on the other hand, foreigners were shopping in Yugoslavia also, buying petrol, meat and other food in particular, which was cheaper. Even more important to the authorities was the ideological significance of shopping abroad: how is it possible that people living 'under the best system in the world' go shopping to Italy? From time to time therefore articles criticising shopping abroad appeared in newspapers, often with the comment that Yugoslav shoppers were being exploited by the capitalist traders. Particularly communists and public officials/civil servants were advised not to succumb to that shopping fever, but there were no sanctions and no other efforts to reduce shopping abroad (except for customs measures).

In the eighties Yugoslavia glided into a crisis. The standard of living fell to the level of the mid-sixties. A number of products were rationed or not available at all (petrol, oil, washing powder, citrus fruits). Shopping abroad was concentrated therefore on foodstuffs; and anyway, due to the growing rate of inflation which in the mid-eighties grew to hyperinflation, Yugoslav citizens could hardly afford to buy anything else anyway. The geographic position of Slovenia allowed its citizens to compensate for the shortages with weekly shopping trips abroad (the supply in Slovenia was better than elsewhere in Yugoslavia as well). Buying power improved in 1990 when Yugoslav Prime Minister Ante Marković froze the exchange rate of the national currency (dinar) in relation to German the mark at 1:7.

For a period of a few months Slovenian salaries reached the level of their Italian

and Austrian counterparts, which had an immediate effect on shopping across the border. After the crisis, which led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia and consequently to the independence of Slovenia, shopping abroad gradually normalised. Goods are abundantly available in shops at home, therefore shopping abroad is not a consequence of insufficient supply anymore; it is rather a matter of lower prices and (or) of prestige.

Border crossings, shopping abroad and travelling have had an important influence on the lifestyle of Slovene people in the post-war decades. They sharpened their sense of quality and influenced domestic production and trade, making an effort to reach Western standards. Shopping abroad further exerted indirect pressure on politics, which was – at least to some extent – forced to take account of the demands of consumers and act accordingly. It must be mentioned however, that shopping was limited – particularly in the fifties and in the first half of the sixties – by the low standard of living. In the course of time a specific consumer ritual was established, a sort of shopping fever to which the majority of Slovenians (and even more Yugoslavs) succumbed.

A typical feature of that attitude was that people did not only buy products they really needed. When abroad they had to "take the opportunity" to make the journey "worth the money and time" it took and therefore bought everything that came to their hands. This philosophy was in perfect agreement with the belief that saving and the rational spending of money made no sense, since under socialism the state was believed to be responsible for providing housing, regular income and solving other problems of its citizens; however, not all of this could be implemented and Slovenians tended to be more economical, for example many of them bought flats or built houses on their own.

Shopping tourism was only one of the influences that formed the post-war so-

cialist consumer mentality in Slovenia. Its impact has to be seen within a broader context, together with films, music, television, mass motorization, the expansion of foreign tourism in Slovenia and economic emigration. All of this led to the fact that Slovenians accepted Western standards and behaviour patterns, in the style of their home decor, their clothing and the way they were spending leisure time, from as early as the 'liberal' sixties. By the second half of the seventies, for example, more affluent citizens already had access to inter-

national credit cards, including American Express. People took from socialism what was of use to them (free schooling, good health services, full employment), whereas the ideology that filled political speeches, newspaper articles and TV news was perceived as a necessary evil. During the last two decades, self-managed socialism was hardly taken seriously by anyone. This was probably also due to the fact that both regime critics and party officials met on their shopping tours across the border.