People from the Three Borders

I have a house in Istria. It is situated on the top of a hill, in what once used to be a little medieval town. The view from the hill stretches out almost to the sea in the south, almost to Trieste in the west, to the stony plateau of Ćićarija in the north and finally to the big mountain of Učka in the east. When I am there I often have the feeling that I am on the bridge of a ship, especially when, in autumn, a milky fog covers everything except the surrounding hilltops, giving them the appearance of islands.

But I am not on a ship. My house is in the middle of a peninsula in the northern Adriatic, between the bay of Trieste and the bay of Rijeka. Since the collapse of Yugoslavia, the biggest part of the peninsula belongs to Croatia, the smaller part to Slovenia, but there is also a tiny little strip of land that belongs to Italy. Thus the 4,500 square kilometres of the peninsula are divided among three states, I live in one, and I can almost see the other two from my window.

Every time I climb the hill to my house I am happy. But

as soon as I turn my eyes away from the beautiful landscape, reminiscent of Tuscany, my mood turns gloomy. I become aware of questions I don't like, of pressures I don't feel anywhere else. First of all, I become acutely aware of the new borders. When I descend from Črni Kal to Sočerga, from the mountains to the valley, the landscape does not change, people understand each other's languages and eat the same food, but everything is overshadowed by a newly erected monster – the iron construction called the state border that divides them. The real border here was installed by nature itself, because this is the point where the Mediterranean culture begins, the culture of olive oil, wine, fish, pasta and several languages that one assimilates just by being born here.

The sea is no more than 50 or 60 kilometres away in any direction from the heart of Istria, and it brings an openness to the atmosphere, the food and the habits of the people.

At the state border Slovenes nonchalantly wave you through, without even looking at your passport. But on the other side the Croats are waiting. You can see the suspicion in their eyes when they ask you if you have anything to declare. Myself, I'm always tempted to answer, but instead I say nothing. I feel as if I am sinking into a different reality, not a visible one, but no less real for that. I was born in Rijeka, a city that shared some of the history of the peninsula. The city itself was divided during the Second World War. My mother lived in Sušak (which belonged to Yugoslavia) and worked in Rijeka (which belonged to Italy). Every single day she crossed the bridge in the middle of the city that separated the two countries from each other. I too feel the burden of the question that Istrians are asked today: who are you? Not in the metaphysical sense, but in a very concrete one. People are asked that directly or

indirectly. It means are you Croat? Are you a proper Croat? Are you patriotic enough – that is, are you a nationalist?

Istria is the most western part of Croatia, the most southern part of Slovenia and the most north-eastern part of Italy. It is on the edge of each of these countries, as it used to be on the edge of the Austro–Hungarian empire or Yugoslavia. The pressure to define, to categorise, to choose one particular nationality has been here before, and the same practice is part of the new political reality. Once again, the 300,000 people living on the three borders are pressed to prove their national affiliations, as people from the margins of any state always have to do in turbulent times. These demands bring insecurity and fear. There may be no war here, but there is no peace either.

Going from Buzet to Trieste, you have to show your passport four times in the course of a journey that takes little more than half an hour – and you have to cross another state, Slovenia, in the process. You might work in one town while your wife works in another, perhaps only a ten-minute drive away, but in Slovenia. You might wake up every morning and go to dig your potatoes in a field on the other side of the border. Istria is a rather small and compact geographical unit, and because of that, borders here have always been intangible. There was no iron curtain here: people got married, worked and lived together, not only across the Croatian–Slovenian border, but also across the Yugoslav–Italian one. Now that a real border has been erected, in the first place between Croatia and Slovenia, you become aware of just how small Istria is. This partition is the consequence of a political decision, not of the way people here live.

Istria is a territory of ten distinctly different Slavic dialects and four dialects of Italian origin. Yet if you enter

a bar or a village shop, you will be addressed in your own language while the barman or shopkeeper and other customers continue to chat among themselves in another, and perhaps even a third as well. At my friend Igor's house, his parents talk to him in a Croatian language and to his wife in Italian. This happens at the kitchen table, during the same conversation, while they all eat the same minestrone soup and drink the same sour Merlot wine. They switch languages with no visible effort, understanding each other perfectly. This mixture of languages and the ease with which the people slip from one into the other is characteristic of life here. People understand each other on a deeper level. They do not make problems out of their differences; it is others who do that.

This part of Croatia is today a problematic region. When in 1994 a Croat reporter interviewed inhabitants of three Croatian border villages which had been annexed overnight by Slovenes, he was faced with a 'strange' reaction. To the Croat reporter, these people said that they were Croats, to Italian reporters that they were, of course, Italians, and the Slovene reporters were told they were Slovenes. They would say the same to any representative of officialdom. 'Who are they really?' the confused journalists asked. But the locals saw no contradiction in claiming three different nationalities; neither would they describe themselves as opportunists. In their view, the misunderstanding lies in the fact that the journalists were posing a simple 'either–or' type of question. To the reporters, it was impossible for one person to be a Croat, an Italian and a Slovene all at the same time. The journalists saw the villagers' nationalities as political categories; the villagers were talking about their own identity, of which their nationalities were only one aspect.

Indeed, nationality and identity don't necessarily overlap, and perhaps Istria is the best example of this. If it was only journalists who were taking an interest in nationality as a political category it would not be much of a problem, but there are others, too, namely, the centralist government in Zagreb. They want to know who the hell those people in Istria are. When the majority of Croatian citizens voted for an independent state of Croatia in 1990, why, in the census of 1991, did as many as 20 per cent of them declare themselves Istrians and not Croats? Istrians were a non-existent category in the census and this 20 per cent should have listed themselves under 'others'.

But Istrians today are apparently trying to establish their region as their 'nationality', because they want to avoid defining themselves, or being defined by others, as 'pure' Croats, or Italians, or Slovenes, or Serbs. Zagreb is, of course, right to suspect them of not being nationalistic enough, as are Ljubljana or Rome. Sitting there ruling from hundreds of kilometres away, how can these authorities understand the meaning of Istrianism – the enlarging concept of identity, as opposed to the reducing concept of nationality? To Istrians, identity is broader and deeper than nationality, and they cannot choose a single 'pure' nationality as their identity. Living in the border region, they understand better than anyone else that we all have mixed blood to a greater or lesser extent. They have also suffered from nationalism, and in its worst form – ethnic cleansing – enough to have grown tired of it. Paradoxically, for the first time in their history, at the first elections of the newly independent republic of Croatia, the Istrians felt free to reject the concept of one nation; they felt that the time had come to express what they really consider themselves to be. But in today's nationalist Croatia, this was not what was expected of them.

My nearest neighbour is Karlo, or Carletto – two names for the same sixty-seven-year-old man with thick glasses and a bad leg. Whether he is Karlo or Carletto depends on whether he is sober or not. In the morning he declares himself a Croat, speaks a bad Croatian dialect and is prepared to enter any political debate, if he is not too preoccupied by the weather. But he is only a Croat until early afternoon. By then, he has consumed several glasses of cognac and enough beer in the local bar to assume his other, Italian nationality. Now he is Carletto. Suddenly, he speaks an equally bad Italian dialect, remembering episodes from his youth under both the Italian fascist government and, later, the Yugoslav communist one. To complicate matters further, his younger brother opted for Italy during the referendum after the end of the Second World War. This man lives in Trieste and visits his elder brother once a month. Their sister lives in a small town in the Croatian part of Istria.

Again, Karlo–Carletto, in common with all the people from the three villages, sees no contradiction in being both Croat and Italian, not even in the space of a single day. Moreover, he is both at the same time, and each of these nationalities is part of his identity. If you ask him to choose just one, he can't do it, because he would have to choose between his brother and his sister, between his father and his mother. All his life he has lived in a small, long deserted and decayed village, where one cannot even buy newspapers. He does not drive, he has no television (although he listens to the radio) and he ascends to the nearby town only when he needs a doctor. All his life he has been only himself. Why would he want to pick out one part of himself and confine his identity to that one trait? As we have seen, lately, he and many others in Istria have

formulated their protest against the political pressure of the 'purists' by declaring themselves Istrians, which has driven the Croatian Democratic Union ruling party leaders, party apparatchiks, and especially hard-core nationalists crazy. This has had direct political implications. In the first elections, the population of Istria voted overwhelmingly (68 per cent) for its regional party, thus defeating the centralist right-wing CDU in the region. In the last elections, in 1995, the regional party won an even bigger victory: this time it got 77 per cent of the votes. The message is clear. *You tell us it is impossible and politically incorrect for us to declare ourselves Istrians, that is regionalists. Well, we'll show you exactly what it means to us: it means subordinating any nation and ideology to the region; it means that identity rates higher than nationality, because nationality reduces you to one political dimension only, while identity encompasses your whole human experience.* In fact, what started as a psychological defence mechanism against nationalism has developed into a political project.

Clearly, Istrianism is a reaction to the long historical experience of the people living here. And this was always a region not only of mixed population, but also of a shifting one. For example, in the census of 1910, 39 per cent of the people in Istria were Italians, 50 per cent of them Slavs (Croats and Slovenes). Under Benito Mussolini's fascist government, 30,000 to 40,000 more Italians arrived from Italy, while there was an exodus of part of the Croatian population for fear of fascism. The other big exodus took place after the Second World War, when half the population – mostly Italians, but also many Croats – fled Istria, afraid of the revenge of Tito's communists. The peninsula has never recovered from that loss. People literally left everything behind, cows and pigs in the stables, even food

cooking on the stoves. The communist government confiscated their property. Despite the Osimo Treaty between Yugoslavia and Italy, signed in the seventies, which supposedly solved this problem, their property is still a difficult issue and can always be used as an argument to start a conflict. The result is that today only about 8 per cent of the people living in the Croatian part of Istria are Italians.

The departure of both Italians and Slavs was the result of nationalist ideologies and of 'ethnic cleansing', of forced Italianisation as well as forced Slavisation. That particular experience – shifting populations, shifting governments and shifting borders – has forged the Istrian identity. The Istrians of today have learned to tolerate different languages and nations, to live together irrespective of political borders and to put their region above nation or ideology. The Istrian model has demonstrated that tolerance is possible, and that it works. Yet today's Croatia, with its tendency towards a nation state, views this as a problem, not a success story. An alternative based on values other than nationalism is automatically suspect.

To go shopping in Trieste is quite normal here. You would think that it would be the norm to go to Rijeka, because the distance is the same and you don't have to pass any state borders, and the language is Croatian there. But this is not the logic in Istria, and the reason is simple. During communism, people went to Trieste because in Yugoslavia there was not much to buy. Nowadays, they go because there is still a better choice, *and* everything is cheaper. As I have mentioned one of the paradoxes of the post-communist economy is that the same goods are more expensive in, say, Croatia, Slovenia or Albania than they are in Italy, Germany or even Austria. It is enough to visit one shop in Rijeka and one in Trieste to compare prices, and

you will have no doubts about where to go shopping.

On one weekly food-shopping excursion to Trieste I took a friend along, a neighbour from my little town up in the hills. As we approached the Croatian state border, he took out his Croatian passport. But on entering Slovenia, he showed a Slovenian passport to the police officer. To my surprise, this was not the end of the story: when we reached Italy, he produced a third document, a brand-new Italian passport! I asked him why he possessed three passports. 'It is a matter of survival; one never knows what will happen here,' he answered simply. I was interested in how he had acquired them all. He was born in Croatia, so here he got the Croatian passport. But he had also worked for a long time in Slovenia, and this gave him the right to claim a Slovenian passport, too. But what about the Italian one? In February 1992, the Italian parliament passed a new law on citizenship, which made it possible for those Istrians who had not taken the opportunity to opt for Italy before 1955, and who had therefore been Yugoslavian citizens, to regain their Italian citizenships if they applied within two years. This particular law caused an outcry in Croatia, because it was interpreted as a scheme to reconquer Istria. But the Istrians themselves took it rather pragmatically, as one might expect. It gave them the chance of an Italian pension, of a job there if there were no jobs in Istria, and to educate their children in Italy, all of which doesn't necessarily make them Italians, much less traitors, as they have been portrayed in the official press in Croatia. The way my friend sees it, his identity is not defined by changing his nationality from one to another, or again to a third, but in incorporating all of them. He, too, is a strong regionalist and is an advocate of transregionalism, the practice of economically connecting parts of the same

geographic area across state borders. To Zagreb, of course, this sounds like yet another threat from the people of the three borders.

Yet most of all, my friend would prefer to get rid of all of his passports. He is well aware that in today's united Europe it is archaic to put up new borders and to have three passports instead of one. 'Imagine,' he says to me, 'one day, perhaps only a few years from now, both Slovenia and Croatia will become members of the European Union. All these papers and tensions, all our fears and insecurity, will suddenly become obsolete. And no one will force us to identify with just one part of what we experience as our identity. I dream about that day, when nobody will hate me because of the food I prefer, my memory, or the language I speak.'

I know what he means. I remember driving from Austria to Italy for the first time after the Austrians entered the EU. I remember my excitement when I saw the empty, abandoned crossing point near Villach, the vacant sentry boxes and the absence of customs. But being a part of Croatia – that is, of the disunited part of Europe – before entering such a bright future, both Istrians and all other Croatians will be forced to live not in the present, but in the past, for yet some time to come.