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Suicide in the Perception of the Slovene Society from the 19th Century up to World War II**

IZVLEČEK

DOJEMANJE SAMOMORA V SLOVENSKI DRUŽBI OD 19. STOLETJA DO 2. SVETOVNE VOJNE

Članek se ukvarja z vprašanjem, kako je slovenska družba dojemala samomor v drugi polovici 19. in prvi polovici 20. stoletja. Posebna pozornost je namenjena vprašanju, kako so avtobiografski viri obravnavali temo samomora in kako je bila predstavljena v kontekstu čustvenega režima tistega obdobja. Pri tem so v ospredju razlogi ali motivi za samomore, omenjeni v spominih in pismih, žrtve samomorov in način, kako so samomore opisovali njihovi sodobniki, družinski člani ali prijatelji. Kot se je izkazalo, so bili samomori kontekstualizirani na zelo različne načine glede na spol, družbeni razred ali politično pripadnost, motivi zanje pa so vključevali najrazličnejše razloge.

Ključne besede: samomor, spol, družbeni razred, 19. stoletje, srednji razred, intelektualci, položaj žrtve

ABSTRACT

The article addresses the question of how suicide was perceived by Slovenian society of the second half in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. It pays particular attention to the question of how autobiographical sources addressed the topic of suicide and how the latter was presented in the context of the period's emotional regime. The contribution focuses

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on the reasons or motives for suicides mentioned in memoirs and letters, on the people who committed them, and on the mode in which suicides were described by the contemporaries, family members, or friends of those who committed them. As demonstrated, suicides were contextualised in various ways, depending on one's gender, social class, or political affiliation, while the motives for taking one's life included a plethora of reasons.

Keywords: suicide, gender, social class, the 19th century, the middle class, intellectuals, victimhood

Introduction

Despite the expedite modernisation Austrian intellectuals were plagued by pessimistic thoughts at the turn of the 19th century; the society was trapped into numerous contradictions, overcoming political crises but failing to find a definitive answer. It was well aware of the cul-de-sac of its political activity and sought solace in creativity. At times, many intellectuals and young politicians were surrounded by an air of melancholy, feeling discomfort and loss. The rise of individualism, with its advantages and disadvantages, including isolation and a sense of estrangement, furthered nihilism and pessimism.¹ This sense was no stranger to the Slovene society, which was marked by other dimensions of pessimism as well. As argued by Peter Vodopivec, in the final years before World War I, Slovenes experienced a very lively social and cultural development; however, the Slovene national leaders were imbued with worries associated with the Slovenes' emigration,² as well as problems linked with the lack of equality with other nations and the advancing Germanisation.³ At the same time, Slovene intellectuals were plagued by a general anxiety caused by the ongoing situation, the society's smallness and reticence.⁴ Many among them engaged in romantic contemplation on love and death or about being trapped between the reality and ideals, which evoked *Weltschmerz* and self-destructiveness. Slovene intellectuals addressed this in their literary texts, where suicide represents an extreme expression of the crisis of feeling. For instance, the protagonists of Ivan Hribar's⁵ poems or prose committed suicide in several texts. His poem *Jaka Življenjasit* (Jake Weary-of-Life) addresses the subject of suicide and depicts the life of a protagonist who wanted to take his own life on as many as four occasions.⁶ Zofka Kveder⁷ addressed the subject of

1 Jacques Le Rider, *Dunajska moderna in krize identitete* (Ljubljana: Studia Humanitatis, 2017), 42–45.

2 Peter Vodopivec, *Od Pohlinove slovnice do samostojne države* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2006), 127.

3 Vasilij Melik, *Slovinci 1848–1918. Razprave in članki* (Maribor: Litera, 2002), 648.

4 Izidor Cankar, "Gospodin Franjo," *Dom in svet* 27, No. 3-4 (1914): 126, 127.

5 Ivan Hribar (1851–1941), Slovene politician, diplomat and journalist. Between 1896 and 1910, he was the mayor of Ljubljana and greatly contributed to its rebuilding and modernisation after the 1895 earthquake.

6 Luka Koprivnik, *Ivan Hribar med politikom in književnikom: magistrsko delo* (Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta, 2022).

7 Zofka Kveder (1878–1926), was a writer, playwright, translator and journalist who wrote in Slovene and later in life also in Croatian. She is considered one of the first Slovene women writers and feminists.

suicide in a few literary works, including her first monograph, a collection of novelettes *Misterij žene* (The Mystery of a Woman) and her novel *Njeno življenje* (Her Life). A few Slovene intellectuals attempted to or, in fact, committed suicide. If this was the case, nineteenth-century periodicals did not fail to remember to bring this up, referring to it often as voluntary death, particularly in the interwar period this act was depicted in surprisingly great detail.⁸ In my article, I focus, first and foremost, on intellectuals of both genders, also due to the abundance of sources; consequently, I address primarily the perception of suicide in the middle-class society, which is complemented with few sources from the working-class milieu as well.

By surveying autobiographical and biographical sources, I seek to provide answers to the question of how the society of the period understood and contextualised suicide. In doing so, the article does not deal with a faithful reconstruction of actual experiences because every reminiscence is subject to self-deception or involuntary memory; by contrast, light is shed mainly on the narratology and the contextualisation of narratological universals.⁹ The representation of suicide in autobiographies is complemented with an overview of a few other archival sources, letters, and newspaper articles that reveal the protagonists' motives, the milieu, and the responses of the official discourses to suicide, as well as the emotional regimes of individuals who interpreted these events. Additionally, I analyse non-fictional autobiographies where the narrators' identity is clearly identifiable and there is no distance between the writing and the experiencing self.¹⁰ Usually written linearly and following a chronologically continual narrative from the birth to the later stages of life, these coherent "one's own life stories" provide an insight into an individual's perception of life in the social, economic, legal and other dimensions, which is the focal point of our interest,¹¹ i.e. how was the suicide discourse impacted by one's gender, social class and political convictions, as well as how the narrative was expressed in the socio-historical sense.

National Martyrs

Initially penned mostly by the Slovene bourgeoisie, in Slovene ethnic territory autobiography appeared in the second half of the 19th century and was subject to certain rules. In the interwar period, the authors adhered to the tradition of autobiographical writing that followed the guideline that the author's life journey must be at

8 Fran Göstl, "Bežkova bolezen in smrt," *Popotnik* 41, No. 12 (1920): 263, 264. Mrvoš, "Dr. Ivan Oražen," *Sokolski glasnik* 3, No. 5/6 (1921): 166. See also: Ivan Smiljanič, "Konkurzi, samomor, žalosten je pogled na trgovsko polje. Gospodarski polom kot vzrok za samomor na Slovenskem pod Avstro-Ogrsko in prvo Jugoslavijo," *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 63, No. 1 (2023): 50, 54.

9 Alenka Koron, "Avtobiografija in naratologija: sodobne pripovednoteoretske kategorije v raziskavi avtobiografskih pripovedi," *Jezik in slovnost* 53, No. 3–4 (2008): 11, 12.

10 Alenka Koron, "Roman kot avtobiografija," in Miran Hladnik and Gregor Kocijan (eds.), *Slovenski roman* (Ljubljana: Center za slovenščino kot drugi/tuji jezik pri Oddelku za slovenistiko Filozofske fakultete, 2003), 192.

11 Urška Perenič. "Dnevnik kot literarnozgodovinski vir: Tagebuch 1844 Louise Crobath," *Slavistična revija* 67, No. 3 (2019): 429.

the forefront; it must be set in the context of a linear depiction of the development of the Slovene nation into a modern cultural and political society. The authors thus acted in the arena of the formation of a nation and presented themselves as the main players in the dramaturgical trajectory of the historic events.¹² Individuals' life journeys were assessed from the point of view of building a national political community. A similar narrative is seen in many other articles of the period, in which lives of prominent national fathers were evaluated on the occasion of important anniversaries or in obituaries. With nationality becoming a key value, everything was assessed through the same lens, i.e. a consistent story of nation building.¹³ However, in the period at hand suicide was not acceptable, particularly from the point of view of the Catholic Church and its moral coordinates. Moreover, the Church condemned suicide, which begs the question of how to thematise a suicide committed by somebody who belonged to the pantheon of political magnates of the period. So the question of how is the life of such political players to be justified and presented in Slovene national discourse was asked, especially for individuals who devoted their lives to the national community and then decided to end their "suffering" by committing suicide, which was intolerable from the religious standpoint, in a society where everyone conformed to the same religious and dogmatic views of the Church?¹⁴

A few cases shall be identified that are indicative of the then discourse that revolved around suicide; to begin with, we can turn our attention to the fringes of the Slovene space, to the Gorizian area, where Karel Lavrič (1818–1876) lived and worked. He was a prominent Gorizian politician who attempted suicide due to his unfulfilled romantic longing.¹⁵ Eventually, he took his own life; he committed suicide by inflicting gunshots, presumably due to his strained living conditions. He was a lawyer but did not have enough clients and suffered from a shortage of clients and poor health (melancholy).¹⁶ As early as in 1870s periodicals did not refrain from mentioning the end of his life journey. Voluntary death was mentioned in the obituaries; however, no judgements were passed regarding the mode of his passing. His death was presented as a syntagm of national martyrdom that he had experienced on account of the Italians. He was believed to have sacrificed himself for the Slovene nation or, to quote the periodical *Edinost*, "he died but he gave his spirit to the nation and the nation shall protect it as the most precious pearl!"¹⁷ More Catholic-oriented Carniolan periodicals mentioned his departure from the Catholic Church and his mental disease.¹⁸

12 Igor Grdina, "Avtobiografija pri Slovencih v drugi polovici 19. stoletja," *Slavistična revija* 40, No. 4 (1992): 342, 359.

13 Božidar Jezernik, *Nacionalizacija preteklosti* (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani, 2013), 22, 23.

14 Jurij Perovšek, "Idejnopolitični in socialnogospodarski pogledi meščanskega tabora od devetdesetih let 19. stoletja do druge svetovne vojne na Slovenskem," in Jurij Perovšek and Mojca Šorn (eds.), *Narod-politika-država. Idejnopolitični značaj strank na Slovenskem od konca 19. do začetka 21. stoletja* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2020), 20.

15 Branko Marušič, *Doktor Karel Lavrič (1818–1876) in njegova doba* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU, 2016), 29.

16 Marušič, *Doktor Karel Lavrič*, 151.

17 Adopted from: Marušič, *Doktor Karel Lavrič*, 151.

18 Adopted from: *Ibidem*, 148.

Martyrs for political ideals included not only fighters for the Slovene nation, but – later on, with the development of political differentiation – also fervent advocates of different ideas and political programmes. Here we can include the death of Ivan Štefe (1875–1919), a journalist who worked in the editorial board of the daily *Slovenec*. Štefe was an eager supporter of the SLS (Slovene People’s Party). In 1917, when the SLS split, he sided with Ivan Šušteršič and edited his periodical *Resnica*. Following the discontinuation of this periodical, he became unemployed, which led him to despair and voluntary death.¹⁹ His obituary in *Slovenec* called out his contemporaries for having drawn him into the net of illusion, which he appeared to have recognised at the end of his life. He mistake was believed to have stemmed from honesty and loyalty.²⁰ “His speech was a long confession, filled with burning remorse and accusations directed at those who had led him to his ruin.”²¹ Similarly, the unstable situation after World War I contributed to the suicide of Viktor Bežek (1860–1919). Bežek, an educator, “wore himself out due to his tireless activities and his relocation from Italian-occupied Gorizia.” He was believed to have been dealt the final blow by the injustice, when he was denied the position of a school inspector in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which had been promised to him. He felt “as if someone had hit him with a stick on his head” and “he, being an ambitious person, an enemy of idleness, was thrown mercilessly into inactivity [...]”.²² He fell victim to melancholy, a mental disease that reoccurred and could not be beaten even by physicians at Studenec. In the special issue of *Popotnik*, which was dedicated to Bežek, the psychiatrist and physician Fran Göstl wrote a piece, reflecting on Bežek’s life and suicide. He argued that “having been a highly educated man, Bežek saw no shame” in discussing his own mental disease and acknowledged that “unfortunately, this belief still prevails among the people and intellectuals.”²³ He had intended to commit suicide for quite a long time but was prevented from doing it by members of staff of one of Ljubljana’s hospitals; meanwhile, staff of another institution were not as diligent in monitoring him, which enabled him to proceed with his plan.²⁴

Political martyrs were present in other political camps as well, France Železnikar (1843–1903), a Social Democrat, was undoubtedly one of them. He was one of the most prominent leaders of the Ljubljana-based Delavsko izobraževalno društvo (Workers’ Educational Society); he stood trial as an anarchist and was sentenced to imprisonment in Klagenfurt in 1884 and returned from prison in 1892. Despite his sentence he continued with his activities in the Social-Democratic camp, which brought him new problems. Having been a garment-maker who tailored formal outfits, he did not have clients among the middle class because of his reputation, which led him to despair that ended in suicide. A fellow member of the Social Democratic Party argued that Železnikar’s life had been ruined by the injustice caused by the capitalist

19 Štefe, Ivan (1875–1919) – Slovenska biografija, slovenska-biografija.si, accessed on 8 July 2023.

20 IC, “Ivan Štefe,” *Slovenec*, February 8, 1919, 1.

21 Ibid.

22 A. Mikuš, “Nekaj spominov na prijatelja Bežka,” *Popotnik* 41, No. 12 (1920): 212.

23 Göstl, “Bežkova bolezen in smrt,” 263.

24 Ibid., 264.

society.²⁵ His burial was a workers' party event, the Internationale was sung and the police did not disperse the funeral attendees. Marcel Žorga, a labour activist, interpreted Železnikar's death through self-criticism of the party that had failed to notice the suffering among its ranks due to the disintegration of the community.²⁶

According to a few sources, Anton Tomšič (1842–1871), a member of the Liberal Party and editor of *Slovenski narod*, decided to take his own life as well, which points to the difficult position of those working in the media at the time. *Slovenski narod* was faced with severe financial difficulties in its initial period, it was operating at a loss and the financial responsibility was shouldered also by its editors. However, Vošnjak argues that this is not the only reason behind Tomšič's suicide because in the 1870s *Slovenski narod* was already firmly established; the other reason is said to have been love,²⁷ as well as the conservative Etbin Costa's joining as an editor.²⁸ Additionally, Tomšič is said to have suffered from incurable tuberculosis and sexual problems.²⁹ At the time of his death the rumours about Tomšič's suicide were denied and a démenti was published in *Slovenski narod*.³⁰ At the same time, Karel Lavrič's case is indicative of the fact that in the 1870s suicide was no longer considered to be a taboo.

Nevertheless, in the interwar period the press still avoided stating suicide as the cause of death in the case of a few central figures of the Slovene society. Doctor Ivan Oražen (1869–1921) was reported to have died due to an overdose of sleeping pills on the anniversary of his wife's death; according to some sources, he had a predisposition to suicide as he attempted to commit suicide already in his youth due to poverty.³¹ He never got over the death of his wife and was said to have suffered from "heart neurosis".³² Eulogists at his funeral highlighted another aspect of his suffering more than the grief for his wife. "Life had wounded him deeply [...] His strenuous effort for the national freedom and social justice was a constant in his life. Following the dissolution of the monarchy, he was exhausted from fighting against the regime, from hiding from its guards, from police following and prosecuting him."³³ Due to his faith in Yugoslavdom "he suffered his martyrdom and bore heroically his expulsion during the Great War."³⁴ At the time of his death the entire city of Ljubljana assumed that it was a suicide; however, his personal physician ordered to enter heart failure as the cause of death, so that he could be buried within the cemetery walls.³⁵ The periodicals of the period acted in the same way, stating stroke as the official cause of death.³⁶ His

25 Marcel Žorga, *Most* (Ljubljana: Slovenske železnice, 2015), 52.

26 *Ibid.*, 53.

27 Josip Vošnjak, *Spomini* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1982), 230.

28 Damir Globočnik, "Prvi uredniki Slovenskega naroda," *Teorija in praksa* 55, No. 4 (2018): 825.

29 Jaroslav Dolar, "Anton Tomšič v Mariboru," *Kronika slovenskih mest* 3, No. 1 (1936): 38.

30 "Tomšičev pogreb," *Slovenski narod*, June 1, 1861, 3.

31 Josip Kopač, "O preteklih dneh," *Pod lipo* 2, No. 2 (1925): 30.

32 Mrvoš, "Dr. Ivan Oražen," 166.

33 Zvonka Zupanič Slavec, *Dr. Ivan Oražen; Oražnov dijaški dom*, <https://www.orazen.net/dr-ivan-orazen/>, accessed on 31 January 2024

34 "Govor brata Vladimira Ravnihara," *Sokolski glasnik* 3, No. 5/6 (1921): 184–86.

35 "Dr. Ivan Oražen."

36 Mrvoš, "Dr. Ivan Oražen," 166.

social status dictated such behaviour, which was quite different than in the case of a tailor by the name of Nučič, whose son remembered how he and his mother arrived late at his father's funeral because they had been given the wrong time. In the meantime, his father was buried in the field behind the mortuary along with other suicides.³⁷ By contrast, Ivan Oražen's funeral was one of the most noteworthy funerals Ljubljana has ever witnessed.

Probably the most famous martyr for the Slovene cause in the Slovene historiography was the liberal politician Ivan Hribar (1851–1941), who committed suicide at the age of ninety when the fascist troops occupied Ljubljana. He left a suicide note at home and with France Prešeren's poem *The Baptism on the Savica* in the pocket he got in deep in the river of Ljubljanica. His suicide was considered a true martyrdom and later also other national symbols were added as for example the idea that he drowned wrapped in a Yugoslav flag,³⁸

In the eyes of the contemporary Slovene society the only justified reason for being in despair over life for important political figures was thus associated with one's suffering for the nation; in turn, their suffering was linked with the national canonisation. This national canonisation was important for the introduction and advancement of the national project in the 19th century and, as argued by Marjan Dovič,³⁹ an individual's suffering or sacrifice for the community was one of the most important criteria for someone to be singled out as a "martyr". The concept of a victimhood or sacrifice was at the heart of the national movements and discourse.⁴⁰ In the national idea, which celebrates victimhood nationalism, religion and the nation formed a connection. Namely, the narration of the Roman Catholic martyr preceded nations in the Central European space and was, subsequently, taken on by the national movements. They adopted the concept of martyr in the political discourse and the notion of a martyr thus became a constituent part of the national discourse. By way of induction logic, victimhood nationalism passed from prominent figures to the entire nation. Martyrdom became a constituent part of the discourse of nation building. This was accompanied by the politicization of the collective trauma, which was an integral part of nationalism and its victimhood narration throughout Central Europe.⁴¹ Seemingly, along with the trauma narration, each nation in the Habsburg Monarchy had its own vision of the national discourse, which was at the same time used as an instrument to exert pressure on the authorities.⁴² In this context, martyrs were required in order to underline the (un) necessary victimhood or the act of sacrifice itself, where the line between martyrdom

37 Hinko Nučič, *Igralčeva kronika* (Ljubljana: Knjižnica mestnega gledališča, 1960), 46.

38 Zlata Hribar, "Košček slovenske zgodovine," in Irena Žmuc in Janja Rebolj (eds.), *"Homo sum ---": Ivan Hribar in njegova Ljubljana. Katalog ob razstavi Mestnega muzeja Ljubljana* (Ljubljana: Mestni muzej, 1997), 24. Igor Grdina, *Ivan Hribar: »jediní resničini radikal slovenski«* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2010), 119, 120.

39 Marjan Dovič, "Model kanonizacije evropskih kulturnih svetnikov," *Primerjalna književnost* 35, No. 3 (2012): 73.

40 Carla Chargos, "Victim Among Martyrs? Czech Victimhood Nationalism during the First World War," *Central European Papers* 8, No. 1 (2020): 53.

41 Chargos, "Victim Among," 50; Adam B. Lerner, "The uses and abuses of victimhood nationalism in international politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 26, No. 1 (2020): 62–87.

42 *Ibid.*, 50.

as a religious symbol or victimhood of political struggle was sometimes blurred. At the same time and as already known, nationalism obtained an aura of secular religion in the 19th century.⁴³ Slovene periodicals featured texts similar to the following:

“Our national forces are on the rise, not on the wane; our martyrs’ blood bears fruit and we shall prove to Italians, our oppressors, may they be named Crispi or Pecci, to Germans and Hungarians that there is enough of us to stand up to these degenerates. If we perish, we perish as heroes, we do not die a disgraceful death as slaves. As long as we live we shall demand a loud and constant protection of our nationality, our language in the Church, schools, and in public offices.”⁴⁴

Personal stories of national men were part of this discourse. In the concept of national movement, each advocate of the Slovene nation was committed to idealism and to taking a difficult road, one that was riddled with problems.⁴⁵ It was this suffering that rehabilitated the person committing the shameful act of suicide. Deviations – such as was suicide in the bourgeois ethos – were forgiven in the context of the national victimhood.

Victims of Love

Prominent Slovene figures from the national movement who had committed suicide were depicted as heroes. They had fallen victim to the suffering for the emancipation of the Slovene nation; by contrast, a different discourse can be observed in the case of autobiographies of close relatives whose suicide did not arise from the struggles associated with the nation’s well-being. This is exemplified in the life story of Hinko Nučič, who addressed his father’s suicide in his autobiography. His father, a Ljubljana-based tailor, drowned in the river Ljubljanica; a sexually transmitted disease was believed to have led to a deep sense of despondency and disappointment at life. He stuck an umbrella in the riverbank of Ljubljana, with his elegant black overcoat and his hat hanging on it. His son and wife were reduced to severe poverty after his death. Hinko Nučič depicts his father’s suicide as an unavoidable course of events that could not have been prevented.⁴⁶ His father’s suicide is not the only one mentioned in his book. His cousin also took her own life after having been impregnated by a priest. She consumed poison that had been sold to her by Nučič himself, who was an apprentice in a shop. Poisoning was the most frequent mode of committing suicide by women in the Austrian monarchy.⁴⁷ This real-life event was portrayed in literary texts as well. *Slovenski narod* published a feuilleton that addresses the subject of an immoral priest who did not refrain from engaging in disreputable actions. The last installment of his story was confiscated; it is believed to have depicted the events associated with

43 Ibid., 53.

44 Melik, *Slovinci*, 546.

45 Igor Grdina, *Med kraljestvom in republiko duhov* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za civilizacijo in kulturo, 2013), 55.

46 Nučič, *Igralčeva kronika*, 46.

47 Hans Kuttelwascher, “Selbstmord und Selbstmordstatistik in Österreich,” *Statistische Monatsschrift* 17 (1912): 337.

his cousin. Nučič maintained that this story had been written by none other than Ivan Tavčar, who had depicted his cousin as the character of young Ljudmila. However, Miran Hladnik argues that sources hint at Miroslav Malovrh being the author of the short story entitled *Žrtev razmer: Zapiski kranjskega kaplana* (*A Victim of Circumstances: Writings by a Carniolan Chaplain*).⁴⁸ The reason behind the confiscation of the final chapter of the story that should have been published in *Slovenski narod* is in all likelihood not associated with suicide because suicides were mentioned in obituaries and newspaper reports. The confiscation took place on account of the link between the priest and the public ethic.

Of course, suicides committed by women are seen in autobiographies despite the Austrian statistics that indicated that men outnumber women significantly in this regard, which held good for Carniola as well.⁴⁹ Additionally, a woman's suicide was more often understood as an individual act that was associated with emotions, while male suicides were most often regarded as a barometer of the success of the nation's economy and welfare.⁵⁰ The description of the suicide committed by Vida Jeraj Hribar's mother differed significantly from that of Hinko Nučič's father. The details and the actual depiction of her suicide were omitted; however, the reasons for it were discussed. "My mother's heart was too broken at that point. She took her own life shortly thereafter."⁵¹ She mentioned that her mother, a poet Vida Jeraj (1860-1932) had died on the anniversary of her son's death and that "none of us who loved her judged her for having done this. She felt that she could not go on."⁵² Marja Boršnik contextualised the death of Vida Jeraj in a similar way and argues that she never got over the death of her son and that the "tiniest little thing" could lead to "an utterly distressing scene" that rarely transpired "without an agonising suicide attempt."⁵³ The alleged suicide of Zofka Kveder was interpreted in a very similar manner.

"She lost her physical strength, her spirit became worn out and her emotions numb. It was an incurable disease that ate away at any woman's life force: her love was wounded. [...] She was unwell. She received medical treatment for tuberculosis and nerves in Graz, at Topolšica, in Ljubljana, and at Preddvor. Her disease stemmed from deep mental turmoil that shook her womanly soul that was filled with love and selflessness. Her mental anguish and physical weakness were accompanied by financial woes. A single one of her daring aspirations persisted: her wish for resting in peace. She was writing three days before her death, she wrote to the Govekar in Ljubljana: ... Everything was too much. I would like to die. There are many good and noble people in the world, I am tired of everything and I long for peace. I feel it is close and I wish for eternal sleep."⁵⁴

48 Miran Hladnik, *Z romanom po strankarskem nasprotniku*, <https://slov.si/mh/malovrh2.html>, accessed on 1 February 2024.

49 Kuttelwascher, "Selbstmord und Selbstmordstatistik," 314.

50 Howard I. Kushner, "Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective," *Signs* 10, No. 3 (1985): 541.

51 Vida Jeraj Hribar, *Večerna sonata. Spomini z Dunaja, Pariza in Ljubljane 1902–1933* (Ljubljana: Založba Mladinska knjiga, 1992), 47.

52 *Ibid.*, 72.

53 Marja Boršnik, *Študije in fragmenti* (Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1962), 98.

54 P.H., "Zofka Kveder-Demetrovičeva," *Ženski svet* 4, (1926), 400.

Women's suicide is thus interpreted particularly in the context of emotions and is, unlike that of men, associated with love and womanly soul; consequently, it is explained in a very essentialist way.⁵⁵ Similar explanations for women's suicides were given abroad. They were in line with gender roles, where men had jobs and women were supposed to be with their families. If there were deviations from the envisaged role, i.e. if women could not perform their social role as a mother or if their longing for love was not fulfilled, suicide occurred.⁵⁶ In this context wrote Zofka Kveder as well; the most frequently featured motive for suicide in her literary texts is unwanted pregnancy. In doing so, she criticises the role of a mother that women were expected to perform.⁵⁷ At the same time, it can be maintained that, at the time, relatives treated suicides with a considerable degree of lenience and understanding and that they had no particular reasons to keep silent on the matter.

A Few Additional Remarks on Suicide

It can be observed that suicide was not judged or linked with negative assessment; however, authors wanted to provide explanations. Additionally, the second half of the 19th century saw the Austrian space being marked by a fascination with death. Particularly the lower social strata regarded death by suicide as a way out or as an escape from pain. Apparently, a surprising number of Austrian intellectuals and their children committed suicide in the period between 1860 and 1938.⁵⁸ At the same time and much like elsewhere in Europe, this is the period of Romanticism (which was in Slovene ethnic territory extended up to 1900 with the period of romantic realism) that was characterised with the fascination with death and death had a significant impact on literature as well.⁵⁹ This movement in literature emphasised the idea of a suffering genius. Suffering was almost a constituent part of understanding of Romanticism; at the same time, it was Romanticism that once again put religion and religious doubt back into the focus of contemplation.⁶⁰ Many intellectuals wrote about suicide with empathy. Even so, the research on the phenomenon of suicide was conducted by a growing number of social scientists seeking to understand it. As early as in 1910 the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society organised a symposium on the subject. Sociologists and their findings emerged in Carniola and were followed by the most notable ideologists

55 For instance, experts interpreted suicide among men in the army as fear of punishment, weariness of life, debt, unwillingness to perform military service, insanity or mental disease, homesickness, inebriation, broken family relations, incurable disease, and wounded ambition. – Kuttelwascher, "Selbstmord und Selbstmordstatistik," 349.

56 Kushner, "Women and Suicide," 542.

57 Barbara Fužir, *Zofka Kveder kot razbijalka patriarhalnih vzorcev v literaturi s poudarkom na motivu telesnosti (v primerjavi z izbranimi avtoricami srednjeevropskega prostora na začetku 20. stoletja: diplomsko delo* (Maribor: Filozofska fakulteta, 2009), 46.

58 William M. Johnston, *Austrijski duh: intelektualna i društvena povijest 1848–1938* (Zagreb: Globus, 1993), 184.

59 Michelle Faubert and Nicole Reynolds, "Introduction: Romanticism and Suicide," *Literature Compass* 12, No. 12 (2015): 644.

60 Richard J. Evans, *The Pursuit of Power. Europe 1815–1914* (Jouvé: Allen Lane, 2016), 450.

of the Roman Catholic Church, e.g. Aleš Ušeničnik. He argued in the periodical *Čas* that suicide is a consequence of the crisis of modern times. Inter alia, he mentioned alcoholism, the sexual instinct, the crisis of family, infidelity, scepticism and referred to other experts in the monarchy, e.g. T. Masaryk.⁶¹ In order to emphasise the crisis of religion, which he saw as the basic reason for the increased number of suicides in the society, Ušeničnik referred to a number of international authors that researched the social aspect of suicide. It is interesting to note that the liberal camp had similar thoughts on the subject at hand; in the interwar period the liberals argued that suicide spread in areas where the social sense disappeared, the selfishness grew and the fight for survival become increasingly more difficult.⁶² Reports about books that defended suicide and regarded it as a salvation were rarely seen on the pages of *Slovenski narod*.⁶³

Marija Kmet's autobiographical text that came into being in accordance with the narration of the crisis of religion, which prevailed in the media discourse, features a nihilistic view of the world by romanticising death. Her loneliness, her doubt in God was regarded as a consequence of her arrogance. Her pride was associated with the symptoms of liberalism, the right to divorce, and "free love." She was of the opinion that everything is nothing and, in her admiration of Dostoevsky, believed that freeing oneself through a suicide is the greatest power.⁶⁴ "They who seek the greatest freedom must have courage to kill themselves. Only they who dare to kill themselves, have recognised the secret of the deception. There is no freedom like it; this is it, there is nothing beyond that."⁶⁵ Suicide is the *leitmotif* of her book; it is a recurring theme on different pages and it is constantly in the backdrop. It gets defeated by means of a newly found optimism and, in the end, M. Kmet is redeemed by her repeated and newly found closeness to the Catholic religion.

Contemplating about suicide appears to have been quite present in the society of the period. For instance, Anica Gustinčič wrote in her memoir that she "upset her mother every night with her cry: Oh, If only I no longer woke up, if only I died tonight. My sigh for death was nothing but a wish for eroticism, for love."⁶⁶ Janez Trdina wrote about the forthcoming death and eroticism; namely, his first love drove away any doubt, contemplations about death or melancholy.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Alojz Gradnik admitted to having had constant thoughts about suicide between 1907 and 1914 due to his poor health. His disease prevented him from engaging in any mental work and, consequently, he contemplated committing suicide up to 1914, when he had surgery in Padua.⁶⁸ Suicide was mentioned in letters of Slovene educated women as well. Ivanka Anžič Klemenčič wrote the following in the interwar period:

61 Aleš Ušeničnik, "Samomor," *Čas* 2, No. 6 (1908): 295. Andrej Veble, "Dijaštvo in socialno delo," *Čas* 4, No. 1–2 (1910): 77, also refers to him.

62 "Samomori med omladino," *Slovenski narod*, February 13, 1926, 1.

63 "Zagovor samomora in umora iz ljubezni do bližnjega," *Slovenski narod*, October 8, 1904, 5.

64 Marija Kmet, *Moja pota* (Groblje: Misijonske tiskarne, 1933), 38.

65 Ibid.

66 Anica Lokar, *Od Anice do Ane Antonovne* (Ljubljana: Založba Mladinska knjiga, 2002), 28.

67 Janez Trdina, *Zbrana dela. Tretja knjiga* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1951), 484, 487.

68 Alojz Gradnik, *Zbrano delo. Peta knjiga* (Ljubljana: Litera, 2008), 367.

“In the evening, I found an isolated spot on the shore and saw a wild cavalcade. With a strange force, I was pulled in and invited by the waves; I had to tell myself that ending my own life would be the only smart thing to do because to me, and to others, life is useless – but I lack the courage. From this point onwards my respect for suicides will be even greater than thus far: from this you can learn that I am spiritually immoral.”⁶⁹

She was very close to the Catholic circles because worked at the editorial department of *Slovenec*. In this respect, her view was surprising and not in line the Catholic teachings. The moments of doubt and loneliness eclipsed the self-censorship in her confessions. The frequency of the motif of suicide in literature is probably indicative of the fact that intellectuals must have thought about suicide a great deal. As a motif, suicide appeared for the first time in the period of France Prešeren in the second half of the 19th century and became a fairly frequent occurrence in Slovene literature.⁷⁰ Consequently, a few authors were accused of glorifying suicide.⁷¹ All this indicates that in Carniola – not only elsewhere in Europe – self-destructive behaviour was associated with madness and that suicide was surrounded with a certain air of mystique as well. The depictions of Christian martyrs, who accepted death voluntarily in order to escape a dishonourable life or selfless ancient heroes coexisted with the depictions of unrequited lovers. At the same time, the sense of impending death is also an indicator of one’s sensibility and artistic soul, with which the majority of writing intellectuals identified.⁷²

Conclusion

Suicide was introduced into Slovene literature in the second half of the 19th century and this period saw its frequency increase, at least in Carniola. In the decade 1819–1828 a total of 81 suicides were recorded in Carniola and Carinthia; by contrast, 48 suicides were committed in Carniola in 1910 alone, 42 of which were committed by men and only 6 by women. An increase in the number of suicides began can be observed particularly between 1896 and 1900.⁷³ Naturally, the statistical data do not include all instances of suicide that occurred in Carniola because, as seen, physicians decided to hide the actual cause of death on many occasions. Nevertheless, suicide appears to have become a more frequent occurrence. Concurrently, the society’s attitude towards suicide changed, which is indicated by the intellectuals’ fascination with suicide; the characters in their literary texts chose this way of dying much more often than people in real life. Their interest in this subject should probably be understood in the context of the period that was marked by the rise of Romanticism.

69 Katja Mihurko, Primož Mlačnik and Ivana Zajc (eds.), *Ljubim lepa pisma. Dopisovanje avtoric slovenske moderne* (Nova Gorica: Založba Univerza v Novi Gorici, 2024), 197.

70 Zala Mele, *Prikaz samodestruktivnosti in samomora v izbranih delih slovenske pripovedne proze druge polovice 19. stoletja: diplomsko delo* (Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta, 2023), 13.

71 Dušan Moravec, *Pisma Frana Govekarja. Druga knjiga* (Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 1982), 27.

72 Lisa Lieberman, “Romanticism and the Culture of Suicide in Nineteenth-Century France,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33, No. 3 (1991): 611

73 Kuttelwascher, “Selbstmord und Selbstmordstatistik,” 292, 295.

Many circumstances, e.g. gender or social class, had a profound impact on the search for motif for suicide and interpretations thereof. Owing to the specificity of sources, it is difficult to address the differences between the countryside and the city. However, the available statistical data indicate that between 1896–1900 out of a total of 148 suicides that were recorded in Carniola 39 suicides or 27 percent were committed in Ljubljana, the capital of Carniola. At the time, Ljubljana's inhabitants represented 9 percent of Carniola's population.⁷⁴ In terms of the Austrian statistical data, suicide prevailed in the IV group of professions and occupations; this group consisted of the military, freelance professionals, pensioners, persons of private means and people without an occupation or profession. Consequently, the same could be concluded in the case of Carniola as well. In doing so, suicide would be associated particularly with the middle class and intellectual work.

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DOJEMANJE SAMOMORA V SLOVENSKI DRUŽBI OD 19. STOLETJA DO 2. SVETOVNE VOJNE

POVZETEK

Članek se ukvarja z vprašanjem, kako je slovenska družba dojemala samomor v drugi polovici 19. in prvi polovici 20. stoletja. Avtorica na podlagi avtobiografskih virov raziskuje interpretacije in dojemanje sodobnikov tistega časa ter vprašanje, kako je bila kontekstualizacija odvisna od spola in družbenega razreda ter politične pripadnosti. Po avstrijskih statističnih podatkih se je na Kranjskem na prelomu 19. in 20. stoletja pogostost samomora povečala, pogosteje pa se je začel pojavljati tudi kot motiv v literarnih delih. Vse to kaže, da se je odnos družbe do samomora spremenil. Hkrati je intelektualce precej prevzel, saj so se liki v njihovih literarnih delih presenetljivo pogosto odločali za tako smrt, veliko bolj kot ljudje v resničnem življenju. Njihovo zanimanje za to temo je verjetno treba razumeti v kontekstu obdobja, ki ga je zaznamoval vzpon romantike. Občutek bližajoče se smrti je hkrati tudi kazalnik občutljivosti in umetniške duše, s katerima se je poistovetila večina intelektualcev, ki so se ukvarjali s pisanjem. Po drugi strani pa je bil samomor razumljen tudi kot posledica razkroja družbenih vrednot in modernizacije, kar so večinoma obravnavali katoliški avtorji. Na narativ o interpretaciji samomora sta pomembno vplivali kranjska politična kultura, za katero je bilo oblikovanje narodne skupnosti najpomembnejši cilj poteka zgodovine, in spolna vloga, ki takrat ni vključevala presoje pripisanih spolnih vlog.