

REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING: THE SYMBOLIC POWER OF RITUALS IN KAMNIŠKA BISTRICA

Marija KLOBČAR

Institute of Ethnomusicology

Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts

Novi trg 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

E-mail: marija.klobcar@zrc-sazu.si

Abstract: With Slovenian independence a new ritual emerged in the valley of Kamniška Bistrica: it is a special memorial mass on 31st October, connected with the ceremonies on All Saints' day. The commemoration is dedicated to all the victims of WW II and postwar terror, which means not just the victims of resistance against the Nazis and Fascists but also the victims of the civil war, caused by the communists' fight for supremacy during and after WW II.

It was strictly prohibited under the communist regime to mention the victims of the civil war and commemorate postwar executions, therefore such commemorations were not possible. This possibility was opened up with Slovenian independence, when numerous mass graves were discovered. Such discoveries triggered different views and political interpretations, which is also why the commemoration in Kamniška Bistrica is understood as a political manifestation of right-oriented political forces.

The paper aims to open the question of the role of the ethnographer and folklorist in these processes. Is it enough to observe and interpret the ritual itself or should the study go beyond it, up to the causes of the civil war? Is the researcher's role also to contribute to better understanding between people on opposite sides?

Keywords: political ritual, postwar executions, death, Kamniška Bistrica, commemorations, understanding

On 31st October 2012 in the chapel in the valley of Kamniška Bistrica, near the source of the eponymous river,¹ a memorial mass was held, attended by a small group of people. The importance of the mass was emphasized by the presence of three Catholic priests. During the religious ceremony, each of them tried to give meaning to the meeting: they all spoke of the political reconciliation required by the unresolved issues of WW II, of the right of the dead to have a share in the memory, and the right of all of us to remember. The ceremony was followed by the speech of one of the participants: it was the story of the civil war at the time of WW II, of different war events, of killings of the innocent and the story of inequalities in the post-war political system. As an ethnologist, I wanted to be a part of the ritual, but I felt very uncomfortable. I did not know why.

1 The name Kamniška Bistrica denotes the river, the valley and the area at the end of the valley, near the source of the river. In my article, the name refers mostly to the area at the end of the valley.

It was a religious ceremony, declared to be a memorial mass for all victims of WW II,² for those who died during the war and for those who were killed after it, but it was clear that for the participants it was also a political meeting. A special message was already perceived before the ceremony: on the way to Kamniška Bistrica, some people stopped at certain points and silently lit candles. After the ritual, the participants and the priests went to the memorial as a group to conclude the ceremony by praying for the buried.

This ceremony could not be and really was not possible before Slovenian independence: the memorial service was specifically intended for all those who were killed during World War II and after it, especially for the victims of the post-war political violence. The ceremony on the eve of All Saints' Day began with Slovenian independence, i.e. the year 1991.³ Since then, the memorial service has taken place every year. The participants are mostly older people, and their number decreases annually.

WW II and the time after it had had an extremely strong impact on the relationships between the people in Kamnik area, and therefore I found the Memorial Mass in Kamniška Bistrica important for my regional study, but at the same time I was interested in the ritual itself. Why commemoration and to what does it refer? Is this a political ritual? What does this ritual reveal about the people who attended it and those who ignored it, and in what position is the researcher-folklorist and ethnographer as the observer?

Kamniška Bistrica as a Hidden Space: Courtly Hunting and Refuge for those Hiding

In the history of the Kamnik region, the picturesque valley of Kamniška Bistrica has had a special role. Besides its natural beauty there were two other factors for this position. On the one hand, the wealth of game attracted rulers, owners of hunting rights in the extensive forests of the area. This meant that from the Middle Ages onwards the Habsburgs came to hunt, which was connected with the special rights granted to the townspeople of Kamnik by the imperial court: they had the right to exploit the extensive forests, including the Kamniška Bistrica valley.

On the other hand, the Kamniška Bistrica valley was characterized by its remoteness and inaccessibility, enabling military conscripts and fugitives to hide from the authorities. Up to the mid-19th century in Kamniška Bistrica there was a very strong group of outlaws (rokovnjači) who were threatening the surrounding population, until they were defeated by a well-organized campaign of state power carried out by the gendarmerie. Some military fugitives and settlers from

² HANČIČ 2012.

³ Tone Stele, Spominska maša v Kamniški Bistrici. (Memorial Mass in Kamniška Bistrica). <http://arhiv.kamnican.si/assets/files/predstavljam%20vam/SteleToneKB.pdf> Accessed 26th Febr. 2013.

the army remained in the valley among forest workers, who have been the most permanent residents of the valley.⁴

However, the valley did not offer its place just to the rulers and the outlaws. In the late 19th century, the Kamniška Bistrica valley became an important starting point for tours into the surrounding mountains. Due to its exceptional location, this part of Slovenia has become very important for climbers. Kamniška Bistrica thus became a meeting place of different social groups which otherwise would never have met: from the simplest forest workers and tenant workers to students and intellectuals. They gathered on Saturday nights, dancing and singing. They created songs that have become part of the folk song tradition of the valley. Before the Second World War, left-oriented workers gathered in Kamniška Bistrica to celebrate the first May Day, Workers' Day.

The occasional presence of visitors in Kamniška Bistrica has not changed its main characteristic: Kamniška Bistrica was a valley where life and death were very close to each other. Life was very dangerous not just during the time of the outlaws (rokovnjači), but also later. Until WW II many game poachers died: the temptation of game was stronger than life itself.

This fact did not diminish the dignity of death in the valley and in its surroundings: irrespective of the reason for the death, great dignity with special rituals was accorded to the dead person. Before each funeral, the villagers and people from the neighborhood kept vigil over the dead man, praying for his soul and singing special songs, religious and narrative ones. One of the most often heard songs stressing the importance of paying respects to the dead was the song *Mrtvaška kost kaznuje objestneža* (Dead Man's Bone Punishes Wanton Man). It was sung throughout the whole Kamnik area:

Fantič je hodil daleč v vas.	1. A young fellow was walking far away to visit his beloved.
Tjakaj čez britof žegnani.	2. He was passing the sacred cemetery.
Srečala ga je ena kost.	3. The Dead man's bone met him.
Fantič jo sunil je z nogo.	4. The young fellow kicked it with his leg.
"Kaj me boš suval, fantič ti!	5. "Don't kick me, young boy!
Kmalu boš ležal tudi ti!"	6. You, too, will be lying soon!"
Prej ko se j storiv beli dan,	7. Before the white day arose,
fantič je biv na pare djan.	8. The young fellow was put on the bier.
Tresla ga j huda mrzla,	9. He had been shivering terribly,
To j bla po imenu smrtnica.	10. His shivering was named Death. ⁵

The song reflected the dignity of death, at the same time as it created it. This dignity was strongly threatened during World War II, at a time when resistance against the Germans was interwoven with the civil war. In this resistance and civil war, the Kamniška Bistrica valley did not have an important role: it was known as

4 RIFEL 2010.

5 KUMER – VODUŠEK 1970.

a hiding place for those who wanted to withdraw from danger, so the valley did not have a decisive impact on the course of events in the wider area. A completely new story began at the end of World War II, not just for Kamniška Bistrica valley, but also in the attitude towards the death.

The end of WW II: Kamniška Bistrica as the Valley of Death

The German army left Kamnik⁶ on 6th May 1945, as well as German civilians with their families.⁷ Soon the partisan army started coming to the town: on 9th May the partisans came from the surrounding area, from Kamniška Bistrica and from Tuhinj Valley; the following evening a procession of all combatants passed through the streets of Kamnik, accompanied by celebrations. The next day, 10th May, numerous units of the partisan army arrived from Ljubljana. The day after that the 15th brigade of the 15th Division and the majority of the 14th Herzegovina brigade came, followed by other units of the Yugoslav Partisan Army.⁸

A crowd of German prisoners arrived almost simultaneously with the partisan units. It was followed by refugees from other parts of Yugoslavia, retreating to Austria; according to some estimates, there would have been about 8000 of them.⁹ Kamnik area is separated from Austria only by mountains to which the valley of Kamniška Bistrica leads.

The valley which was supposed to bring freedom for these people became for them the valley of death. On 10th May, the first prisoners, two truckloads of injured Ustashe,¹⁰ were executed in Kamniška Bistrica valley, near today's lower station of the cableway to Velika Planina (The Big Pasture Mountain). This execution was followed by liquidation in other places around Kamnik and in nearby Tuhinj valley,¹¹ but the majority of the defeated were directed to take part in liquidation in Kamniška Bistrica. This was the valley where everyone took justice into their own hands.

Among the prisoners who were led through Kamnik to the Kamniška Bistrica every day, the Montenegrins made up the greatest number. According to Montenegrin sources, it is estimated that at the end of May about 2,300 people of Montenegrin nationality died at the killing sites of the valley. To this number must be added the hundreds of victims of the Croatian NDH regular army (Hrvaški domobrani) and a few dozen German soldiers who were also executed at one of these sites. It is estimated that in the Kamnik region around 3,000 people were executed in May 1945 without trial and investigation of individual

6 The town of Kamnik is in the centre of the area, surrounded by mountains.

7 WINDSCHNURER 2004. 109.

8 WINDSCHURER 2004. 110–111.

9 WINDSCHNURER 2004. 111.

10 Members of the Croatian fascist movement.

11 WINDSCHURER 2004. 111.

responsibility.¹² Digging the graves and covering the bodies required the cooperation of German prisoners and people from the neighboring villages.

After the end of WW II, from mid-May until the end of June 1945, three times more people were killed in the Kamniška Bistrica valley than the number of Slovenes throughout the Kamnik area killed during WW II.¹³ The main characteristic of these executions was that they were carried out during formal peace conditions and made without proper trial. The locals who were forced to participate had to undertake to maintain complete silence.¹⁴ The principle was the same as in other places of execution without trial.

In fact, for the new communist government it was a time of revenge: the seizure of power and implementation of revolutionary action was accompanied by violence. It was directed against different categories of the population, both occupiers and collaborators, not just by legal means as may be found everywhere in Europe, but mostly by various forms of cleansing, extrajudicial killings, eliminating the German minority on the principle of collective guilt, and a revolutionary 'purge' of pre-war institutions of economic and political power (politicians, industrialists, the Catholic Church).¹⁵

The executions in the Kamnik area were just one part of such post-war killings in Slovenia; on the other hand there were only a few members of the Home Guard among these victims. The majority of members of the Slovenian anti-partisan side went after the war – like refugees from other parts of previous Yugoslavia – to Carinthia and were driven back to Slovenia by the British military authorities.¹⁶ The Slovenians – it is estimated that there were around 13,500 of them – were killed in other places.¹⁷ This mass-killing of war prisoners and civilians was the largest killing of unarmed people after WW II in Europe¹⁸ and cannot be compared with the killing of quislings in Western Europe.¹⁹

The new Slovenian government tried to conceal the executions: on 18th May 1945 the order was given to conceal the traces of the killings.²⁰ There were supposed to be no graves, and therefore there could be no memory. People who knew about the killings – those on the local and on the state level – remained silent in the postwar period out of fear. One of the collocutors described how her father, who pastured cattle on the mountain high above the valley, observed the valley from one of the summits, watching the mass killing with horror, but did not dare to tell anyone. People were afraid that their eventual testimony would have been punished by death. They had seen too much, so they did not know anything. The social memory was shaped on the basis of fear, not on the basis of

12 HANČIČ 2013.

13 HANČIČ 2013.

14 WINDSCHNORER 2004. 112.

15 Cf. REPE 2005. 48.

16 GREGOVIĆ 2009. 106–121.

17 REPE 2005. 48.

18 DEŽMAN 2011. 36.

19 VODOPIVEC 2005. 98.

20 MUHIČ 2000. 44.

people's "knowledge of the past".²¹ The people who were executed were erased from the book of the living and the book of the dead²² despite the respect paid to the dead before WW II.

Kamniška Bistrica as the Valley of Joy and Workers' Gatherings

Concealing information about the killings in public and fear of the consequences was part of the new government policy. On 31st May, when the executions were mostly completed, the new President of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, came to Kamnik, received by the townspeople as a hero. It was less than one week after Tito's speech about the revenge of the new government.²³ President Tito, who in 1953 became honorary citizen of Kamnik municipality (Novak b. n. l.) visited Kamnik in the following decades mostly to hunt in Kamniška Bistrica valley: the former imperial hunting grounds became his hunting grounds.

In the middle of these hunting grounds were the mass graves of people, soldiers and civilians, killed without trial. Two years after the executions the graves had to be dug up and the bodies reburied, with the help of locals forced to silence. It was said that the ground was "boiling". However, the authorities succeeded in keeping the post-war killings secret. But in the days around All Saints', under communism called The Day of the Dead, police guarded the places of mass executions to prevent people from lighting candles.

Soon after the war and after the mass killings, the Kamniška Bistrica valley revived as the place for trips, workers' excursions and the starting point for mountain hikes. The main event in the valley was the feast on Workers' Day, 1st May, based on pre-war workers' gatherings. In this way a new social memory was formed: "We preserve versions of the past by representing it to ourselves in words and images. Commemorative ceremonies are pre-eminent instances of this."²⁴

These gatherings repeatedly emphasized the rights of the weak and oppressed, but the way to the commemoration place led not just past unknown graves, but past "non-existing" graves. The enthusiasm of workers' meetings tried to cover the memory of the tragic events in which some of these visitors were forced to participate as young members of SKOJ (Communist Youth League) or as locals. Kamniška Bistrica thus became a symbol of freedom, the struggle for rights and the symbol of liberty.

In the early fifties the authorities established a tree nursery by the mass graves, where young trees for reforestation of the valley were raised. It was these daily contacts with the place of violence that caused distress and raised moral

21 CONNERTON 1992. 3.

22 HRIBAR 2005. 148.

23 REPE 2005. 48.

24 CONNERTON 1992. 72.

issues, uncovering the memory of victims of illegal executions. According to the story of one of the women who worked in the reforestation nursery, the people from the neighboring villages who knew about the killings were shocked at the fact that the tree-nursery workers could work by the graves. She said it was not easy to live and to work in the place where people were killed, near the graves which were not even allowed to be mentioned, but as they were aware of the fact that they had nothing to do with these executions they did not feel guilty. They lived and worked there with inner respect for those executed, even when they sang while working by the graves.

Although the graves of people killed in Kamniška Bistrica valley without trial were concealed and it was not allowed to light candles on them, the relatives came secretly, despite fear of sanctions, especially at All Saints'. In all these years, until 1980, when Tito died, control by the police and members of the secret organization UDBA was very strict.

With the small political and social changes after Tito's death, fear was gradually given an outlet: in the eighties, therefore, not only the locals but also people from other parts of previous Yugoslavia started coming to Kamniška Bistrica, since most of the soldiers and civilians executed in Kamniška Bistrica were people of other Yugoslav nations, not Slovenians. Policemen from Kamnik no longer prevented them from visiting graves, but the visitors were still carefully observed at every step. It was a time of changes when also the song about the Dead Man's Bone, the song about the young fellow who did not respect death, was performed at the folklore events.

Ritual as Beginning of Understanding the Opponents: a Memorial Mass and Dirge for the Killed Montenegrins

With Slovenian independence in 1991, as a part of common changes in Slovenia it became possible to openly commemorate the dead in Kamniška Bistrica. One of the basic demands of the new political forces was the right to the graves of all who died during World War II and after it. This issue pointed out the guilt of the leaders of the Communist Party in post-war executions and strongly divided Slovenians.

Under the guidance of historians, some intellectuals among the local people very systematically began to discover this part of Kamnik local history. They started collecting personal stories and listened to all the victims of World War II and the victims of post-war violence. The inventory was published in the *Zbornik žrtev 2. svetovne vojne v občini Kamnik* (Proceedings on victims of World War II in Kamnik, 2004), later supplemented by a monographic study by the historian Damjan Hančič.²⁵ Personal stories, placed in their historical context formed an important part of these publications. Inventories of victims and detection of

²⁵ HANČIČ 2011.

graves labelled by political opponents as “counting bones”,²⁶ brought back dignity to the families of the killed, and this is confirmed every year with the ritual before The Day of the Dead in the chapel in Kamniška Bistrica.

Among those who made attempts to discover the graves in the Kamnik area were the relatives of Montenegrins killed in the Kamniška Bistrica valley after World War II.²⁷ A year after the first visit by Montenegrins, in June 2005, on the sixtieth anniversary of the Kamniška Bistrica post-war killings, a memorial ceremony for the Montenegro victims, members of the Yugoslav Royal Army (četniki of Montenegro) was held. It was organized by the Association *We will discover the truth*, founded after a visit to Kamniška Bistrica the previous year.²⁸ At the ceremony no political speeches were allowed; the organizers also undertook not to use political symbols. Mass was followed by the commemoration of the dead and by a cultural program, where it was pointed out that among the victims killed after World War II were also women and children (STA 2005). Among 2300 Montenegrin soldiers and civilians executed in Kamniška Bistrica, about 80 were priests and 200 intellectuals.²⁹

A very eloquent memorial ceremony for Montenegrins also took place five years later, when the book *Pucaj, rat je završen (Shoot, the War is over)* was published.³⁰ This ritual remembrance was still filled with the awareness of fraud: in 1945, the Montenegrin army, sworn to the king, could easily have got through Kamnik if it wanted to, but it was informed of the peace. And it was deeply marked by the remembrance of Veliki zbjeg (The Big Flight), when 25,000 citizens of Montenegro fled for ideological reasons³¹ and 20,000 never returned.³²

In 2009, among the few Slovenian dirge attendants of the Montenegro ceremony were former Kamnik police officers, the people who had been most loyal to the former communist regime. The apparent contradiction was soon revealed: during the period of the Party these people were responsible for hiding the mass graves: they had to prevent the visitors from lighting candles. In the eighties this was no longer prohibited, but the visits required the supervision of police officers. In the nineties, when discovering and remembering graves was permitted, the most reliable informants in locating the graves were the former Kamnik police officers who were once the enemies of visitors to the graves. They became guides to Montenegrins who were looking for the graves of their relatives. In this way, the policemen also faced their truth. They became friends, visiting each other.

The story of the coming together of relatives of Montenegrin victims and former Kamnik police officers who had served the communist regime is one of the few stories about the convergence between relatives or descendants of victims and successors of those killed. In recent Slovenian history, it is a very rare case: it

26 TRONTELJ 2011.

27 GREGOVIĆ 2009. 223–227.

28 GREGOVIĆ 2009. 229.

29 HANČIČ 2013.

30 HANČIČ 2009.

31 GREGOVIĆ 2009. 47–52.

32 GREGOVIĆ 2009. 234.

seems that each story about post-war killings splits the Slovenian public. This public is still divided by personal testimonies that are heard in public or printed, it is divided by rituals of remembering, it is divided by the finding that among 89,000 Slovenians as victims of WW II there were 13,898 victims of post-war violence.³³

The Ritual as a Way of Understanding the Opposite Side

The retired policemen were the only representatives of the previous communist regime who attended the Parastos for the killed Montenegrins: the Montenegrins living in Kamnik did not come, and at Memorial Masses at Kamniška Bistrica there were no adherents of the other side or members of other nations who had lost people in post-war killings in Kamniška Bistrica. Do such rituals contribute to understanding or do they just bring deeper division?

During my monographic research in the Kamnik region, I encountered many stories concerning the liquidation during WW II and after. These were mostly the stories of the victims, but sometimes I could also find the stories of those who supported civil war and revolution. When I attended the ritual, the memorial mass in Kamniška Bistrica, I somehow became a part of the stories of the conquered side. This is in fact what has caused my discomfort; when I became part of the stories of the victims, I did not hear the other side in me. I did not hear the people who during WW II and after it were often forced to take part in massacres. I did not hear stories of young boys who were made drunk, so that they could sow death or the stories of how these people realized their guilt, but still had to lie. I missed the stories about injustices which caused the civil war, the war which during the occupation divided Slovenians into victors and defeated. I missed the awareness that the story of the post-war killings started not at the end of the war, but long before, with injustices as well as ideological differentiations.³⁴

The memorial ritual was thus my intense personal experience, which made me feel as if I had belonged to people with a particular point of view. It caused the feeling of being inside, and the uneasiness of this feeling intensified my need for distancing. But this experience was very important to me and I needed it: because of the ritual I intensively felt that my research cannot be either objective or subjective, "but interpretive because it mediates between two worlds alongside activity in a third".³⁵ With the experience of this ritual I can therefore open up room for more truths in the "third world", in my monograph. I can open the space also for those that I met indirectly, as stories about the other side. With the assumption that the lie of the winners was perhaps more difficult than the silence of the defeated. With this understanding I will be able to point out the Memorial Mass in Kamniška Bistrica as real reconciliation, not just a nominal one, and with

33 TOMINŠEK-RIHTAR 2005. 19.

34 Cf. HRIBAR 2005. 70–92.

35 Cf. AGAR 1986. 19; cf. PIŠK 2012. 1.

respect which was some decades ago was expressed in the song “Dead Man’s Bone Punishes Wanton Man”.

And with this view I can understand it was not just the song that revealed the inside world of all these people: the problem I talked about resonated also – or predominantly – in silence. This silence has its reasons and its message, so it is as important as songs, not just for ethnological, but also for folklore research. In this way my view exceeds traditional frames of folklore: to understand people it is not enough to listen to the songs but also to trace what goes beyond them, to understand the silence. In this way ethnological and folklore research can contribute to the dialogue between the opposite sides of the civil war.

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$\text{♩} = 194-276$

Fan - tič je ho - du da - leč v_yas, fan - tič je ho - du

da - leč v_yas, fan - tič je ho - du da - leč v_yas.

Fig. 1. The song *Mrtvaška kost kaznuje objestneža* (Dead Man's Bone Punishes Wanton Man) sung in Kamnik area expressed the dignity of death in the period before WW II and after it (Archive of the Institute of Ethnomusicology SRC SASA, GNI M 25.100)



Fig. 2. No graves and no memory were allowed to the victims of post war executions. (Workers at the tree-nursery, working by the graves in Kamniška Bistrica; courtesy of Marija Žagar, Kamniška Bistrica)



Fig. 3.

Attending the Memorial mass for the victims of WW II and post-war violence intensifies the question of how far it is possible to reveal different truths. (Coming to the Memorial mass in Kamniška Bistrica, 31. October 2012, photo Marija Klobčar)